

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Tuesday, September 7, 2010

Subscribe
Today!
[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [OPINION & IDEAS](#) | [FACTS & FIGURES](#) | [TOPICS](#) | [JOBS](#) | [ADVICE](#) | [FORUMS](#)
[Faculty](#) | [Administration](#) | [Technology](#) | [Community Colleges](#) | [International](#) | [Special Reports](#) | [People](#) | [The Ticker](#) | [Current Issue](#) |
[Archives](#)

Faculty

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Faculty](#)

Search

[E-mail](#) | [Print](#) | [Comment \(47\)](#) | [Share](#)

September 5, 2010

Why Teaching Is Not Priority No. 1

By *Robin Wilson*

With lavish recreation centers and sophisticated research laboratories, life on college campuses is drastically different from what it was 100 years ago. But one thing has stayed virtually the same: classroom teaching. Professors still design lessons, pick out the readings, and decide how to test—in many cases, in the same way they always have.

In the last few years, however, a cottage industry has sprouted up in academe to measure whether students are actually learning and to reform classes that don't deliver.

Accreditors now press colleges to show that



Corey Wascinski for The Chronicle

Even though students compliment him on his teaching, says Andrew Hacker, an emeritus professor of political science at CUNY's Queens College, he doesn't know for sure whether he is getting through to them.

[Enlarge Image](#)

they are teaching what students need to know. And as the Obama administration packs more money into student aid, it wants more evidence of educational quality.

But a roadblock may emerge: faculty culture. Not because professors care little about quality or students—indeed, many care deeply—but because of what colleges tell them is important.

"Faculty rewards have nothing to do with the ability to assess student learning," says Adrianna Kezar, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Southern California. "I get promoted for writing lots of articles, not for demonstrating learning outcomes."

A survey last year by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment found that provosts at doctoral universities identified "faculty engagement" as their No. 1 challenge in making greater efforts to assess student learning. Faculty members have long enjoyed autonomy in the classroom, and persuading them to change the way they teach is more difficult than it might sound.

But there are some small signs that concerns about teaching quality are having an impact. On several campuses, professors have embraced quality-improvement efforts. In those cases, carrots have worked better than sticks, officials find. Some universities, for example, have given professors small grants to assess and rework basic courses, while others have reduced professors' required office hours or simply paid them more if they agreed to spend more time making sure their courses delivered.

Universities have also added new tracks to graduate programs in education that teach doctoral students how to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. And some faculty job advertisements in other disciplines, too, now ask for candidates who have an interest in the area.

Related Content

Still, quality assessment in higher education is hardly state of the art. "Only a tiny, tiny fraction of all classes

Campus Viewpoints

Find out what you don't know about



Most Popular

[Most Viewed](#) | [Most E-Mailed](#)

Most Commented

1. [Why Teaching Is Not Priority No. 1](#)
2. [The Olive Garden Theory of Higher Education](#)
3. [10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly](#)
4. [Sean Wilentz, Bringing It All Back Home](#)
5. [Professors at U. of North Texas Are Required to Put in Daily Hours on Campus](#)

Past Coverage

[The Merits of Student Evaluations](#) - March 18, 2005

[Student-Affairs Professionals and Professors as Partners in Education](#) - May 5, 2006

[Harvard's Derek Bok: Professors, Study Thine Own Teaching](#) - October 13, 2008

[The Faculty's Role in Fostering Student Learning](#) - October 6, 1995

Recent News

AAUP to Universities: Tenure Is Not Just for Researchers

By *Audrey Williams June*

In a new report, the organization calls for bringing contingent faculty members, the backbone of the professoriate, into the tenure stream.

The Olive Garden Theory of Higher Education

Should American colleges learn a few tricks from corporate suburban restaurant chains?

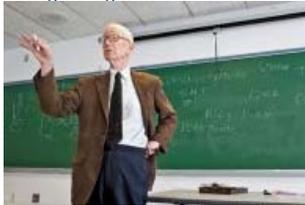
Professors at U. of North Texas Are Required

Audio: Robin Wilson and David Glenn Discuss Teaching Quality

Measuring Stick

Audio: Do Professors Pay Enough Attention to Whether Students Are Learning?

[Enlarge Image](#)



Corey Wascinski for *The Chronicle*

Andrew Hacker, emeritus professor of political science at Queens College, lectures in class. Even after more than 50 years of college teaching, he says, "I can't say objectively or reliably what I do for students."

[Enlarge Image](#)



Joey Pulone for *The Chronicle*

Mikita Brotzman, a professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art, says predefined learning goals aren't always appropriate. In her psychology classes, she says, "it will be something different for everyone."

being taught now have been part of reform efforts," says Kevin Carey, policy director at Education Sector, a higher-education think tank, and a regular contributor to *The Chronicle*. "But with more people pursuing college degrees, we can't continue to assume they learned a lot without any sort of verification."

Little Demand From Students

Faculty members are accustomed to having the final say, indeed often the only say, on what goes on in their classrooms. Only if a professor deviates significantly from the norm do administrators intervene. A tenured professor at Louisiana State University was **pulled from the classroom** after she gave failing grades to most students in her introductory-biology course last year. Short of that, however, professors are typically allowed to conduct their classes as they see fit. That means there is often tremendous variation in what goes on even in different sections of the same course. And it is often hard to tell exactly what students have learned.

"If a student gets an A in my class, and an A in yours, then we say the student is good," says William G. Tierney, director of the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at USC. "We don't make any comments about what the student has actually learned."

That's the case in part because university prestige often stands in as a proxy for learning. "The general public, they want to go to Stanford whether you learn anything or not," says Ms. Kezar. "As long as employers and parents promote that system, it's not really about what you learn, they just care if students go to a prestigious place."

Indeed, many professors feel little pressure from either students or the public to change the way they do

business. "Why I need to spend a lot of time working with my colleagues documenting learning outcomes is unclear to me," Mr. Tierney says of a hypothetical professor. "What is going to happen if I don't? Will no one take my classes? Will no students attend this university?" Faculty members, Mr. Tierney notes, are busier than ever, and assessing student learning is often viewed as just one more demand on their time. "Should they pay attention to learning outcomes rather than understand how to make their classes go online or how to update the syllabus on reading that's changed in their area in the last year?" he asks. "They can't do it all."

If there is any pressure from students, say professors, it is to keep classwork manageable. Mindy S. Marks, an assistant professor of economics at the University of California at Riverside, performed a study that showed college students spend 10 fewer hours a week studying now than they did in 1961. Meanwhile, college grades on average have gone up. Unless one is to assume that current students learn much more, much faster than students did 50 years ago, a natural conclusion is that professors are demanding less while giving better grades. Meanwhile, neither students nor their parents are complaining.

"We appear to be catering to students' demands for leisure," says Philip S. Babcock, an assistant professor of economics at the University of California at Santa Barbara who performed the study with Ms. Marks. "It doesn't look to us as though there is any external incentive to make courses more rigorous and grading more strict."

Even professors who believe they are good teachers with high standards often have no real way to confirm that. "I was looking at an English 101 composition class, and the professor was having them read Foucault," says Andrew Hacker, an emeritus professor of political science at the City University of New York's Queens College. "The kids will memorize it like quadratic equations, but

to Put in Daily Hours on Campus

By Katherine Mangan

Faculty members must spend four hours a day on campus, four days each week. They aren't exactly pleased, but fieldwork with students counts, too.

Campus Viewpoint

Information provided by participating institution



At Longwood University, "Discover the Power in You" is a daily call to action for students, faculty and the campus-wide community. It inspires nationally-recognized academic programs, great teaching, real world training and a classic college...

• [View Campus Viewpoint](#)

they will forget it right away and never use it again." The young professor, though, probably thought she was doing the right thing, says Mr. Hacker, because "teaching Foucault is what she knows, and it will impress her elders."

But even Mr. Hacker, who is beginning his 55th year of college teaching, acknowledges that he has no way of knowing whether his own lessons get through to students. Yes, they seem rapt during class and compliment him on his teaching. Still, he says: "I couldn't say objectively or reliably what I do for students."

Researchers have found that there are different ways to measure a professor's effectiveness in the classroom. Scott E. Carrell, an assistant professor of economics at the University of California at Davis, studied student learning at the U.S. Air Force Academy and found that students who took introductory calculus from experienced professors didn't do as well in the intro class as students who took the course from less-experienced instructors. But students who had the experienced professors did better in subsequent courses, like Calculus II, than did students who had inexperienced teachers for introductory calculus. Mr. Carrell's results were published last spring in an article in the *Journal of Political Economy* called "Does Professor Quality Matter?"

Fear of Testing

Because professors prize their autonomy, they are leery of any efforts to standardize classroom teaching. That doesn't necessarily mean they just want to do their own thing whether it's effective or not, or that they don't care about students. Gary Rhoades, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, says good professors already pay attention to what works with students and what doesn't. "What do you think we've all been doing for 100 years?" he asks.

But no one wants a higher-education version of the testing spawned by No Child Left Behind, the standards-based reform created when the Bush Administration began questioning what students in elementary and secondary schools learned. Requiring professors to document student learning can be counterproductive, says Mr. Rhoades.

"There is the mentality that you have to have a lesson plan and learning objectives, and so you end up encouraging the professors to spend more time filing those than they actually do engaging students and working with them," says Mr. Rhoades. "Classes are like organic things: Not every one is the same. If you are a good professor, you are responding to what students are getting and what they're not. If you try and mechanize that, it can be a problem."

Mikita Brottman says listing learning goals on her syllabus doesn't make sense for the courses she teaches in psychology. "These aren't courses where I have certain information that I present to students, and students will have the ability to do A, B, and C," says Ms. Brottman, a professor in the department of language, literature, and culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art. "It's much more like an exploration. I don't know what the students are going to achieve. It will be something different for everyone."

Research and Results

Plenty of campuses, though, are beginning to evaluate courses—particularly those within the general-education curriculum—to ensure that students are learning basic skills. Getting faculty members involved in those efforts can be complicated.

North Carolina A&T State University is part of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, which helps campuses "enhance the educational impact of their programs." North Carolina A&T asked students what worked and what didn't in the classroom.

Based on the students' responses, the university started leaning on professors to provide two hours a week of extra group tutoring for students, something that professors haven't been pleased about. So the university is experimenting with ways to entice professors. At first the university offered to reduce their required office hours. But that didn't prove enough of an incentive, so the university is now offering to pay professors extra if they give students more help. "Faculty members tend to have more independence," says Scott P. Simkins, director of the Academy for Teaching and Learning at North Carolina A&T. "They want to be their own agents and manage their own time. But what we're trying to do is be more data-driven and show them what seems to work best."

Michelle D. Miller, an associate professor of psychology at Northern Arizona University, has

worked with the National Center for Academic Transformation to help redesign the introductory- psychology course on her campus. First the university put a full-time professor in charge of coordinating all sections of the course. Then it collapsed several sections into larger ones with more students but increased the staff, by asking two professors to team-teach each section. The university also asked graduate teaching assistants to monitor questions that students e-mailed to professors, so that faculty members weren't on the front lines. Both the team-teaching and the e-mail filter appealed to professors and made them more amenable to helping with the course redesign and assessing the results. The university is now giving professors small grants to help redesign basic courses in three other academic departments.

"There is a right way and a wrong way to talk to faculty about assessment," says Ms. Miller. First, she says, "something is better than nothing, and it doesn't have to be perfect." Faculty members in psychology, for example, give students a simple multiple-choice assessment before and after they take Psych 101 to see how much they've learned.

The other thing that resonates with faculty members, says Ms. Miller, is to tell them that being able to measure student learning is in their best interest, like an insurance policy, if anyone does question their effectiveness. Ms. Miller developed an online psychology class for her university and was ready when he colleagues asked: Are students really learning? "I had my assessment tools, and I know students are not just sitting at home clicking buttons," she says. "There is no magic to assessment. You don't have to have a Ph.D. in it. Just think of something that makes sense to you."

 E-mail  Print  Comment (47)  Share

Comments

1. hamersly - September 05, 2010 at 12:15 pm

To bring back the focus on students and their learning is way past overdue. It is depressingly ironical that most faculty think any serious discussion of teaching and learning is useless. A full-professor once told me this: "we all have PhDs and we know how to teach. Nobody needs to tell us how to teach." This happened in the corridor, near the restrooms, which helped me a lot--not wanting to engage in a discussion with a colleague with such blinders, I told him that I had a restroom emergency, and was thankful he didn't follow me into the stalls :) Here is to hoping that the forces unleashed by Hacker, et al, will begin to constructively reshape higher education.

2. lost_angeleno - September 06, 2010 at 12:41 pm

We have been told by our Executive Vice President and Provost that tenured faculty have a primary research obligation to the university. Period. We were then told to write grant proposals and articles if we expected pay raises. Statements like that tend to focus one's attention. (I care enough about my teaching to work at it anyway, but with those criteria looming, research does get my primary attention. Hey, a family's got to eat.)

3. 22137478 - September 06, 2010 at 08:42 pm

The unproven assumption here is that assessment improves teaching. Assessment is first a fully self-justifying system. There are few external yardsticks by which to measure whether assessment actually improves learning. Essentially, university are pouring countless work-hours into an endeavor that is dubious at best.

Assessment also fails because It assumes that students unfailingly work hard to do what professors try to teach them. Any failure to get results must be the fault of the professor. Stanley Fish says it best in his piece, "Aim Low" (and I paraphrase): Teachers are responsible

for the performance of teaching, not for its results.

Working hard to improve teaching should not be confused with assessment. The two are not synonymous.

4. jabbassi - September 06, 2010 at 10:15 pm

How about replacing the word "assessment" with the phrase "making sure we're doing what we say we're doing"? I believe most faculty are interested in whether students are learning. Excellent teaching does not necessarily translate into effective learning. The only way to know if it is - and what to do to improve if it isn't - is to, well, assess.

5. ucprof - September 06, 2010 at 10:32 pm

In my department in the Univ of CA we are promoted based on our research record. With exemplary teaching and no new publications a prof will not be advanced. However with excellent research and passable teaching one can get promoted. The faculty evaluation system is completely skewed towards research. At the same time this is what largely distinguishes the ladder faculty from lecturers and adjuncts and evaluations should focus on things that distinguish ladder faculty. I think it would be good to include training of PhD students in the teaching part of the evaluation and consider that as something that could allow for promotion. The point being that graduating PhD students is a form of teaching and at the same time it is something that can only be done at a doctoral institution by research active faculty.

6. joseangel - September 07, 2010 at 05:59 am

These articles have become so common that I've lost track which ones I've already read, but the overarching critique is the current dilemma of student teaching. My guess is that this historical moment, or crisis, has much to do with the incredible impact of technology over the past two decades. The problem with these articles is the lack of a historical context that appreciates these ideas over time. I mean, we didn't get to where we are at (at least in terms of education and knowledge) as a society and civilization in only the past few years...

The author starts out by stating "With lavish recreation centers and sophisticated research laboratories, life on college campuses is drastically different from what it was 100 years ago." Really? So which colleges and universities were spending millions on "lavish recreation centers" instead of teaching the kiddos?

7. lizziebear59 - September 07, 2010 at 06:00 am

There is an elephant in the classroom that is not being discussed in this article. The elephant is that faculty research brings in big money to the universities they work for. In France at least for science, research and teaching have always been separated. The science institutes such as the Pasteur Institute etc. are funded separately from the universities. This I believe helps keep the educators and researchers focused on their respective tasks.

As long as adjuncts have to cobble together 3 teaching jobs and commute to each one to make a minimal salary with no benefits, it is difficult to foresee them having time nor resources to do quality research, that's what sabbaticals are for. There are universities with unions that allow adjuncts but even the salary here is capped because the individual can only work 8 or less teaching hours per semester. Please stop comparing apples with oranges, 70% of the university faculty are adjuncts - don't you think they must be doing something right because this trend has been going on for the last twenty years.

8. lizziebear59 - September 07, 2010 at 06:05 am

Yes, I know separately is spelled incorrectly with the above article, please forgive me I neglected to proofread the above response.

9. mal1000 - September 07, 2010 at 06:15 am

Not again. Of course, we know that faculty are not rewarded for good teaching. What gets rewarded, continues: what does not get rewarded, does not. Period.

We've known this for decades. There is nothing new in this article or in any of the hundreds of articles The Chronicle has published over the last several decades.

But, I guess, like myself, The Chronicle has to have a positive balance sheet.

10. mal1000 - September 07, 2010 at 06:15 am

I mean to say "hundreds of articles on this topic" ...

11. beveridge - September 07, 2010 at 06:49 am

Things are not as they were 100 years ago. Now teaching is outsourced to adjuncts, I am sure assessment will be outsourced, as well, probably to same testing companies that have made billions from NCLB. Just collecting invalid data does not make for real assessment.

12. jeff1 - September 07, 2010 at 06:53 am

I hope you realize that there ARE INDEED institutions that focus their faculty on teaching. Most of the dialog in higher education is about the so-called elite institutions (e.g., doctoral) that focus their energy on research and are dependent upon the cycles of funding. Some of us out here, with very large student populations (not a community college) focus on teaching and learning quite well thank you very much. Faculty heard me say it at every college orientation and at convocation. Students heard me say it at each of our 20 summer orientations (I am the academic VP). We do indeed assess teaching and learning and use the data, albeit not perfectly, to improve. We are more typical of institutions than are research 1 institutions. How about a reality check CHE?

13. stevendkrause - September 07, 2010 at 06:56 am

22137478 is right: I'm not trying to be too snarky about this, but where is the assessment of assessment?

Let's also not forget where this assessment comes from and what "assessment" really is here too. In the closing paragraphs, Prof. Miller points out that some simple assessment from an instructor is better than none at all, that asking students simple multiple choice questions to get some feedback is a form of assessment. That's a self-assessment of a sort that I am guessing many faculty would welcome, but that's not what's happening. Instead, assessment in universities is a "top down" approach where the results really mean nothing to me as a teacher. In other words, these assessments satisfy the dean or the provost, but they don't tell me anything about how well (or not) I am teaching, and so for me, these assessments are busywork at best.

14. jwr12 - September 07, 2010 at 07:31 am

While people working at think tanks and researchers at educational policy institutes -- i.e. researchers -- tend to love the new outcomes assessment, because it pleases policy and funding masters and sounds important -- people who work in classrooms, i.e. teachers, tend to hate it. It's because we're proud and self-interested, the proud and self-interested policy wonks say. I say it's called "higher learning" for a reason, or should be; and I've yet to see an outcomes assessment produced that didn't turn the rich variety of ideas in a classroom into a bland mashed potatoes of skills that can be measured on a rating of 1 to 5. I'm sorry: until the

intellectual quality of outcomes-speak rises about 90%, why should college teachers dumb their courses down so that they can be tracked this way? There's an odd synergy, by the way, between this article and the cover story in the NYT today about unemployed software engineers. That's a profession that's had eminently assessable skill sets and a seemingly very practical orientation, a golden ticket to the middle class ... er, except it's now utterly outsourceable to software engineers elsewhere. The truth is, "assessable" skills are a good thing to have, but an education is still a better one. And to the extent the chase for skills outpaces the race for education, our children will be left both unemployed and unenlightened. My grandmother whose adulthood came in the 1930s told me to get an education -- by which she meant a broad, liberal arts education, full of ideas and short on rateable skills-- "because that's the one thing they can't take away from you." And time has shown she was right. So why listen to the wonks, just because the Cato Institute has decided that history classes should be trackable to market-skills (for market jobs that won't be there)?

15. kossack - September 07, 2010 at 07:42 am

I've taught at a two-year college for over twenty years. The focus has always been on teaching and measuring what has been taught. Each class has its measurable objectives. The evaluation device attempts to address how well those objectives have been obtained based upon a rubric that has been developed. The students know the objectives in the beginning, and they have the rubric. The cards are all on the table.

Are my efforts appreciated by the administration? No. (They have interesting data to show but believe the world would be better if I retired.)

Has focusing on teaching aided in finding a position elsewhere? No. (I don't have a research agenda. However, I've aided hundreds of students obtain their goals even if it meant recommending a different educational avenue.)

Have the students learned anything? The jury is still out. However, I have been approached by former students who remember me while, unfortunately, I have no present sense recollection of them. They then proceed to share with me something that happened in class far too many years ago. So, just perhaps, the answer is yes.

16. jneuburg - September 07, 2010 at 08:16 am

We might want to enter into this world of assessment gently, beginning with using simple Classroom assessment techniques (CATS) to see if and what students have learned at the end of a lecture. If, at the end of a class session, I hand out 3x5 cards (or use the electronic version) and ask my students to tell me one point that is quite clear, and one point that is still "muddy", I do two things: I find out what they _have_ taken away, and I find out what point(s) I need to reinforce. So, the "improvement in learning" is immediate.

17. vernaye - September 07, 2010 at 08:25 am

My experience with assessment has always been this: that institutions of higher education care FAR more about the process of assessment than they do about the actual process of teaching. It's just another bureaucratic exercise, in my opinion, that actually takes away from the professor's time focused on students.

18. 11118843 - September 07, 2010 at 08:31 am

The title might grab your attention but is a bit misleading and not "generalizable". I have been teaching at the graduate level for seventeen years at an institution that has always focused on teaching and is constantly assessing and compiling data on classroom learning outcomes. Research for us is secondary, welcomed, but not nor ever will be first on a faculty agenda. Faculty spend considerable time determining appropriate assessment tools and techniques to determine at both the graduate and undergraduate levels what is being taught in individual courses and programs but the true measure of what is learned is the student's ability to transfer specific skill sets into other courses and apply in their intended profession(s). We focus on teaching skills that they will use outside the classroom walls. As indicated by a colleague earlier (Jeff1), the focus is indeed on teaching at many institutions and we are constantly trying to improve on how we assess student learning.

19. mdorland - September 07, 2010 at 08:36 am

That's it, blame the teachers! What about all the micromanaging, meddling, and pontificating about teaching and endless evaluating that actually makes any serious attempt at teaching undergrads well nigh impossible. Tormenting profs about their "sacred teaching mission," as one of our Deans put it, is the latest ludicrous management attempt at squeezing more efficiency out of our deeply broken institutions. At least the students know better: that Facebooking is really what it's about.

20. dakin - September 07, 2010 at 08:59 am

Assessment, when poorly done, can be horrific in many ways. But assessment of student learning is what teachers do in the classroom every day, or should. How can you teach someone if you don't know what they are understanding? The trick, as I see it, is to move beyond grading the short-term retention of basic knowledge and into the teaching and assessment of lifelong skills. The problem is that not only does that take time to learn how to do it, but it can easily take more time out of a teacher's life as well. Faculty developers do their best work when they help faculty to move to better ways to assess student learning. Those changes may be small at first but often they become incremental and over a few years the teacher often becomes a champion of the new method. Teachers, on the whole, know what works and what doesn't, but they do what they think they have time for. If colleges and universities want to make a change, they need to help faculty see that their classes could be changed for the better with minimal effort. The benefit of all this is not just for the students. Teachers who know how to assess student work well also find that their students are working harder and that class is becoming more rewarding for both their students and themselves.

21. cwinton - September 07, 2010 at 09:02 am

To see what assessment and "standardized" education have accomplished look no further than the public schools, which are drowning in a quagmire created by folks who want to impose industrial-like control over K-12 classrooms. Who profits? The assessors of course. The assessment industry is now big business and enormous resources that should be going into support for classroom instruction are instead being channeled to support the assessors false claim that assessment will improve instruction. The siren song they sing is now being turned full force on higher education.

22. iris411 - September 07, 2010 at 09:18 am

if the students are not committed to learning, no one can teach them. If they do, not many professors can stop them by teaching badly. That left us only those students who are not yet committed to learning, those are the ones where teachers can make a difference in theory. but most likely, if the students are not rewarded by learning by the society, they won't be interested in learning. all they care is to get a degree and find a good job. what can you do? why we always grill the teachers for students' failures?

23. bstevens - September 07, 2010 at 09:30 am

Please, someone, please explain to Mr. Tierney that many teachers do indeed "do it all," and very well.

24. bbaylis - September 07, 2010 at 09:41 am

Faculty should not be hired to teach. Did that get your attention? Faculty should be hired to help students learn. What's the difference? The primary difference is the focus of the activity. In teaching the primary focus is on the teacher. In helping students learn the primary focus is on the students. How much the instructor knows; how well he or she presents the material in the

classroom are important; but should not be as important as what and how much students learn.

I hear some of you saying, "You can't hold me responsible for what someone else does or doesn't do. I can't control students." I'm not asking you to control students. I am asking you to lead them to the well of learning and help them see that it is important for them to drink deeply from that well. You should note that I didn't say tell or show them that it is important. The student needs to know that it is important. Students are people just like us and all of us balk at the response, "Because, I told you so." to the question, "Why?" At this point, someone is going to say, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can not make it drink." However, if someone else owns that horse, who is going to be held responsible for the death of that horse in your care from dehydration? You need to figure how to make the horse want to drink. We need to figure out how to help students see the importance of learning. Until students have a desire for learning, nothing we do will force that learning on them. Once they have the desire, we need to be there to help them in their quest for learning.

25. tappat - September 07, 2010 at 09:44 am

Great comment by #3. The best thing for people who don't want to be effected by a university education is to go some low place, which means some place with extensive assessment. When anyone but the most severely brain damaged is told that at the end of a time period he will be assessed on his ability to write X, or even, XYZ, or even XYZ+011100011100, or anything, then he will only do that, all during the unit of time allocated. Changing expressed goals can be a crucial and essential means of fostering learning, but this and so many other means and techniques are eliminated in an environment of the sort of assessment that is promoted by this CHE article. As the AAUP contributor in the comments notes, professors, even research professors, do usually care about the people around, and most have been successfully professing for quite a long time. The real problem seems to be that professors are successful, and there are people who do not like the success of professors. And then there's the plain fun people have destroying things. The culture of assessment makes it hard for anyone effected by the culture to appreciate associations and connections that are not always commonly and authoritatively expressed. These people have and then live with an il-liberal education, which is what many people want for those people.

26. oioioi - September 07, 2010 at 09:56 am

At my (foreign) institution, we have taken the time to standardize the teaching by co-developing constantly evolving course materials that are shared among sections of the same course. We've agreed on the outcomes, we've agreed on the standards, we've collaboratively developed the powerpoints, we've agreed on the test questions, and we have implemented a system that serves the students and is, actually and unsurprisingly, less work for all faculty members. And like many places, students sit exams that are proctored by staff, turn in the exam scripts to a central office, and are graded by external examiners, completely independently. Nothing could be fairer.

All this doesn't mean you can't bring your own ideas to the classroom - we all do - but it means that we've collectively embraced the responsibility to our students to adhere to standards and agreed that we shouldn't all have to re-invent the wheel when we teach an undergrad course that covers the basics.

I don't see the downside and I like this system much more than the American system I left behind. I guess the barrier is getting faculty to agree to these things and take the time to sit down and assemble the materials? Take it from me: giving up a little independence in exchange for a system that serves the students and takes the pressure off individual faculty is well worth it.

27. loudonm - September 07, 2010 at 10:03 am

This article makes many good points. One that it overlooks is that many (not all) students-- some of them with excellent GPAs--would prefer to have lectures with PowerPoint slides that tell them exactly what they have to know for exams, and exams that test over these specifics. For these students, any teaching creativity that requires a scintilla of extra effort on their part is not welcome. And, when the rewards are for bringing in research dollars, there is little incentive for some faculty to move beyond the status quo. (A colleague once said that higher education is the only commodity in which some people complain if they get their money's worth.) Fortunately, many faculty are committed, creative individuals who move beyond this minimal expectation.

28. yamadaty - September 07, 2010 at 10:16 am

It is absolutely crucial to balance the importance of teaching with publications. It would require, however, the rebalancing of a culture of academic capitalism which turns professors into entrepreneurs by commoditizing their courses or encouraging them to write grants so that the university bottom-line benefits from their activities. The public university shift to for-profit modality will need to reexamine the importance of instruction -- a rather intangible commodity -- into account for this shift to occur.

Many faculty do assess what they teach and can determine whether their students are gaining the requisite knowledge. How about a quiz at the beginning of class to see how much students have retained from the previous discussion? If they don't do well, the topic needs to be reviewed. MANY professors do this simple form of ongoing assessment with its utility to check one's own effectiveness in the classroom.

29. tallenc - September 07, 2010 at 10:22 am

The research priority might be a major reason for questioning measurement of teaching effectiveness at research institutions, but I don't think it totally explains the concerns that some of us faculty members have. I teach at a community college where the focus is squarely on teaching and learning--as it should be at such an institution (and arguably at universities as well). My concern is based rather on my firm belief that education is simply not measurable. The idea that it should be seems to me to be yet another unfortunate result of the education-as-commodity, student-as-consumer model that so many educational institutions have adopted. Don't misunderstand. I don't mean to suggest that we don't care about improving our teaching. We very much do. Teaching is what we do, most of us love it, and we want to do it well. Unfortunately, though, many of the well intentioned but nevertheless misguided attempts to get us to devote all our time to having students do things that can be measured on some numerical scale actually takes away time that we could be devoting to preparing well for our classes and distracts us from the important part of our work, which is not crunching numbers, but taking care of students.

30. 11272784 - September 07, 2010 at 10:58 am

These new assessments are to a large degree just a cop-out for institutions that have their priorities wrong. Research institutions need money - that money comes from grants, not students. Ergo, reward research grants. All other faculty are expendable.

Institutions have needed to focus on teaching for years, and the assumption that having a PhD means you know how to teach is fantasy. Courses in how to teach should be required for all faculty, and at least one-third of the tenure decision should focus on teaching, regardless of budget woes.

31. cfabrams - September 07, 2010 at 11:03 am

Please let's not forget how, in the US anyway, research came to be such a big aspect of the modern university. There were two watershed policy events that created the "research university." The first was the Land Grant Act of 1860. Not only did it provide for education of the sons and daughters of the "working classes," but it also provided for higher education institutions that worked to solve real societal problems.

The second event was WWII and the tremendous mobilization of intellect that resulted from it applied to exploiting science for human "needs," most of all at the time, war. More specifically was the federal decision to make use of the intellectual resources of institutions of higher education by beginning to plow federal dollars into mission-oriented research. It was, correctly I think believed that the synergy of the communities formed by highly educated faculty and motivated students would result in the best thinking possible applied to the most important problems of society.

It turned out to be true.

But one wonders if it was ever anticipated that it would lead to this endless, unsolved, much hand wrung about teaching versus research "game" that we have found ourselves in most intensely for the last 25 years.

We'd better find better solutions to this problem that we have or we face losing both the public esteem (such as it is) for higher education as well as the massive problem-solving capacity that higher education represents.

We certainly do not need solutions, it seems to me, that SEPARATE the student engagement aspects (teaching) from the problem-solving work (research). But we do need to address the demands on faculty that come from obsessive focus on only one aspect of their responsibilities for career success.

Is there enough support and assistance for teaching? Is there enough support and assistance for research? Should busy faculty be beat up for not adopting the assessment scheme of the day, the one that takes more time than they have and leaves no time for thinking about course improvements, student mentoring, etc.? Should busy faculty have to be great clerks and managers to meet every twist and turn of the research proposal preparation and grants management processes at the expense of not having time to sit down with the students in their labs and think together?

If the juggernaut of having "teaching faculty" who only teach and "research faculty" who only or mostly do "research" continues, we are destined to have institutions with mediocre teachers and lackluster researchers.

32. softshellcrab - September 07, 2010 at 11:26 am

1. I agree with others who point out that this is saying nothing new. Teaching is not rewarded or emphasized in the higher level schools. And I am a good (and rewarded) publisher who is saying this.

2. Our assessment at my college is done just for accreditation. It has little value in actually making our program better.

33. stevegabel - September 07, 2010 at 11:38 am

The idea of one test for multiple sections was tried. When I attended the University of Chicago, there was an "Office of the University Examiner." All students in the Gen Ed courses sat for the same exam. The system did not work well (except for producing grades) and was abandoned.

34. 11121641 - September 07, 2010 at 12:02 pm

"Assessment" is the higher ed equivalent of public school "teaching to the test" dead end. Faculty have a course outline with specific learning goals for each class. The instructor designs tests or gives equivalent tasks to measure student learning. The instructor frequently asks students if they understand, have questions, etc. in every class. And there are student and peer evaluations to double-check that the instructor is doing his or her job. "Assessment" is merely one more bureaucratic layer added to the pile.

In any event, now that students HAVE become paying customers, they expect to be entertained and not particularly burdened with homework. They evaluate mainly on whether the instructor (1) is entertaining, (2) an easy grader, (3) open to being manipulated by the student, and (4) whether the student coincidentally has an interest in the subject matter being taught to begin with. (This is especially pertinent in required courses.)

I have taught a wide range of subjects at college level, including German and Russian languages, advanced literature courses (in English and in German), film studies courses, aesthetics, literary theory, among others. In recent years I have been reduced to the humanities "secretarial pool," teaching as an adjunct with zero rank, and permitted only to teach composition classes. There is only so much one can do to make writing (a requirement of ALL students because it is no longer taught in high school apparently) interesting to students who, for the most part, resent being forced to take this required course. If the student is unwilling to participate in his or her own education, there really is not a whole hell of a lot the instructor can do. (You remember what they say about horses drinking water?)

But let's cram "assessment" down faculty throats so we can scapegoat the faculty and avoid holding the student responsible for his or her own education. As paying customers that is now their expectation and right. And the administration had yet another tool to wield against faculty.

35. unusedusername - September 07, 2010 at 12:42 pm

We have been doing assessments for over 100 years. They are called "tests" and "written

assignments". If someone wants to know what I teach in my class, they can go to my website, and look at my syllabus and problem sets. No, I don't give multiple-choice tests because they are not a good way to measure students' ability to do multistep problems.

What the "assessment" movement is really about is standardization. They want all professors to teach the same way, so that we are cogs in a wheel that can be hired, fired, and outsourced at will. I am the expert in my subject. I know what is important and what should be covered. I don't need some committee to do it for me, and then force me to link everything I do to canned course outcomes. If you want smart, creative people to do good work, you have to give them room to breathe. The assessment movement wants to put us all in straitjackets.

36. g_martin - September 07, 2010 at 12:51 pm

Faculty work for colleges/universities just like staff do. Ideally, if teaching is important, then the administration should make faculty do it and prove they are effective. They should not be given extra money to do what they are hired for do.

That said, if administration is going to expect teaching, they are going to have to reward faculty when tenure, promotion, and merit raise time comes. Teaching will have to be placed on par with research. You all should see how UNC-Greensboro addresses this topic. They are on the right track.

37. prof_truthteller - September 07, 2010 at 01:14 pm

A couple years back, at a conference, I had a lunch time conversation with a faculty from another college. They were trying to convince their administration to provide them with more release time and/or compensation for the extra work required to meet the assessment demands of accreditation. Of course, that college's administration only wanted to see more work, for less pay, so this request did not match that agenda. So the faculty decided to prove that the assessment of student learning outcomes was excessive and duplicative. Part of that was to carefully track outcomes against grades, over time, and controlling for other variables. I wish they would have published that study. I still recall how he laughed and said, "Grades made up the red line, assessment of outcomes was the blue line, and our graph ended up with one big fat purple line."

38. prof_truthteller - September 07, 2010 at 01:23 pm

OK, funny story, (above comment) but don't misunderstand, I am not opposed to assessment of outcomes. I am opposed to the misuse and abuse of the faculty, the disregard for their years of experience in teaching or if you prefer, "helping students learn." I am astonished to read, in this article, that SOME colleges are understanding that professors need help and/or incentives to take on yet more work. WOW, they have finally figured it out. Anyone who has participated in the implementation of student learning outcomes and the assessment processes, that build a cycle of continuous improvement, etc., etc., as demanded by accreditation bodies, can testify that is a huge boatload of additional work. It's just not reasonable to expect to increase anyone's workload by a third and to think that they will do it willingly, or even, enthusiastically. I find the assumption that faculty are somehow "set in their ways" and just don't like change, or that faculty are lazy, just so demeaning and insulting. This article is refreshing in that it acknowledges the reality, with examples, that show the simple truth: the demand for more work from the workers mean the employer must provide more time or money or both.

39. jrajadas - September 07, 2010 at 01:40 pm

Most programs go through the accreditation process where teaching and its effectiveness get scrutinized very closely. When that process stamps your program "Accredited" that in effect is saying that you are doing "enough" teaching to get by This may be enabling the administrators to justify emphasizing the research & publication part more than teaching even though all of them state in public that delivering quality teaching is their top priority. I have not come across many engineering schools touting the fact that they are "top performing" in teaching. When the powers that be start referring to the students as "paying customers" you know what their view is when it comes to quality teaching. This is a malaise that is deeply ingrained in the university education system and I am not sure what, if any, factor would change it. To complicate the problem some universities try to be the answer to all things potential students are seeking thus

spreading resources thin into a large number of disciplines. When the business model replaces the education model as the primary focus at an university, we know where good teaching belongs.

40. asterix - September 07, 2010 at 02:03 pm

The primary obligation of an academic is to scholarship.

41. profurban - September 07, 2010 at 02:16 pm

Things were NOT better once. If research would separated from the rest of the university then the degree mills and other universities without walls, and rented walls, and so on, would rapidly replace us. State universities would be the first to go. Tenure is really, historically, to protect faculty freedom of expression, and without that we'd all be replaced as soon as possible with someone cheaper (by State legislatures for state universities). Gee, so if a waiter isn't motivated he/she doesn't give good service. If an accountant isn't motivated beyond his salary he/she makes arithmetic errors? We have great jobs and should do them for the joy of teaching. IF you don't get joy out of it then you are the problem, and the cause of the problem.

42. tallenc - September 07, 2010 at 02:37 pm

Regarding No. 29 above: Alas, I too am guilty of poor proofreading. I am aware of the difference between "it" and "is," as well as the fact that "numerical" is not a word. Apologies.

And just to clarify: I don't object to assesment per say; I just think that true assesment of education involves qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation. The bureaucrats want nice quantitative data that fits into charts, but I don't think that's how the educational process works (or should work).

Did my students really learn anything from my argumentation class? We'll know 30 years from now when the former student has to make a major life decision and knows (or doesn't know) how to evaluate the options. But how on earth can we measure that result numerically?

43. tallenc - September 07, 2010 at 02:38 pm

per se. It's going to be one of those days, and therefore, my posting stops here.

44. 11159766 - September 07, 2010 at 04:00 pm

This article seems to take way too much for granted about the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. A few anecdotes are used to create the impression that college teachers are not paying attention to student learning.

45. sabbatical - September 07, 2010 at 04:17 pm

Duh, duh, and duh. I'm in a "teaching institution," and the only criterion that matters for tenure is research. Publish or perish. Duh.

46. academicwanderer - September 07, 2010 at 04:31 pm

Several thoughts:

First, assessment does not need to produce measurable results -- it needs to produce

demonstrable results. Not everything can be measured, but students should be able to demonstrate that they have learned and what they have learned. This is one of the great things about e-portfolios (I'm surprised no one has brought those up in this discussion!).

Second, articles such as this one need to get beyond the R1 universities (or any other university that supports grad students); the fact of the matter is that, not only are most teaching faculty adjuncts (is that really true?), most full-time faculty are NOT in research-oriented universities. As several have noted in the comments, they are in institutions that are pleased with publications and grants, but that are really all about teaching (with 4/4 loads).

Third, at institutions where teaching quality matters (as at mine), assessment is a great component of promotion/tenure files. Student evaluations are NOT good instruments to evaluate teaching quality, but they are often all there is. If a faculty member also has assessment results, they can say "hey -- they may not have liked me or my class, but at least they LEARNED!"

Finally, what ever happened to the Preparing Future Faculty programs that were cropping up at PhD-granting institutions? PhD students need to learn how to teach (and not just PhD students in Education, as the article seems to imply).

47. mall1000 - September 07, 2010 at 04:46 pm

The comments regarding assessment remind me of a situation at the university where I teach. This story relates more to program assessment than assessment of teaching.

In any case, one of the questions related to graduation rate. Due to an innocent error on someone's part, the proportion written in the report was, I think, "less than 1%".

Our assessment report went up and down the various committees that deal with assessment. Eventually, we received the decision that our program was doing wonderfully, and to "keep up the excellent work for which XYZ University is known."

I don't spend too much time on assessment reports now.

Add Your Comment

You must be logged in to add a comment. Please [login now](#) or [create a free account](#).

Commentary



[Silent Students](#)

Advice



[Underclass Educators](#)

The Chronicle Review



[Captivated by Cops](#)

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [OPINION & IDEAS](#) | [FACTS & FIGURES](#) | [TOPICS](#) | [JOBS](#) | [ADVICE](#) | [FORUMS](#) | [EVENTS](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Help](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Permissions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037