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Our University – The Three R's

If B.F. Skinner was a university leader who wanted to foster excellence in teaching, research, and service, as do all intelligent university leaders, he would have come up with a dynamic suggestion, one that many inside and outside of the academic setting would find unnerving, hard to accept, powerful in its simplicity, far reaching in its ramifications, uncontestable in its forthrightness, and nearly impossible to implement at many public universities.

He would have said, and brace yourself, or assume a sitting position, “reward excellence”.

He would be a devotee of the three R's: recognize, retain, and reward faculty and student excellence. Skinner believed that a desired result should be positively reinforced. Neither rocket science nor complex psychology.

Maybe it is too simple to work on a university campus.

In any university setting, and most assuredly one where faculty is unionized, rewarding excellence is a challenging task. There are so many reasons not to do so. The forces of the status quo, the “why not me pleas”, and the strenuous squeeze from card-carrying membership to treat all the same, regardless of performance, conspire to drive organizations to mediocrity.

When recognizing excellent faculty performance, substandard performance is also illuminated. We all want to live in Lake Wobegon, where *“all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average,”* according to Garrison Keillor.

It gets worse.

When there is great pressure to seek minimum threshold performance, those who excel can be driven away (why bother to pursue excellence when a second-rate effort leads to the same result), or they are punished for preeminence (their standards might be limiting to others and they become unpopular as excellence is a threat to mediocrity as surely as light is a threat to darkness.)

Students want to see excellence, and be around it, and they will take chances, such as applying to universities carrying \$50 application fees when acceptance rates are less than 10%, to be around people who are good at what they do. Excellence in performance of faculty is the answer to all enrollment and quality challenges.

All other fixes are elixirs.

The pressing problem is that most reward systems on university campuses sway towards research over all other activity, including teaching. The three R's are frequently the result of research. Until reward systems are more sensitive to excellence in teaching, and faculty and administrators are willing to focus on classroom acuity, many poor teachers will be tenured and receive raises and rewards of the office.

Unfortunately, tied to a lack of precision in measuring teaching is obfuscation with the appearance of accuracy in measuring research productivity: the number of books, journal articles, papers, or conference proceedings by a faculty member. With the plethora of avenues available for publication there is little quality control in all of this. If work gets accepted by peers it is excellent, even when no one knows who the peers are or what qualifications they possess.

This leads to a world that overvalues anemic scholarship and undervalues animated teaching. Both can be measured, observed, and rewarded, and assessing excellence in each is equally difficult, but possible.

After Gordon Gee, president of The Ohio State University, suggested we may be expecting too much research productivity and too little teacher excellence, faculty member Jennifer Higginbotham responded, "The idea of awarding tenure based on teaching makes me anxious."

Her response "makes me anxious."

Our University should be committed to recognizing, rewarding and retaining excellence in teaching and research, never one or the other.

Excellence is not the cause of anxiety, but the cure.