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Our University – The Center

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Our University – The Center

At our University, over a thousand times a day, a teacher walks into a lecture hall with 500 students or a classroom with 50 students, or a laboratory, studio or practice room with five students, or a research laboratory or artists' studio, with one student, and begins the process that is the center of university life.

Teaching.

If a university values great teaching, many things will follow: resources for creative and scholarly work, the generation of new ideas about the world around us, informed relationships between cultures, and a host of other things fueling learning. But teaching comes first because it is the center of a university.

After three decades of teaching, and through personal relationships with a thousand university faculty members - from a diverse range of disciplines - who have taught in every setting imaginable, I have found that when students believe they are being taught well I usually agree with them.

I believe the best teachers are ones that students identify over and over again as the best teachers.

This determination of excellence in teaching is not as mysterious as many make it out to be.

If you have attended college classes, do you remember the forms that each faculty member would give out at the end of the semester asking for your opinion of his or her ability to teach?

Responses from students over a period of time will give a good indication of teaching ability. One semester's work is not reliable; 10 years': you can go to the bank with it. The students don't lie and the research literature and multiple studies confirm this.

Students are good judges of teaching ability and they cut through the fog.

Faculty who are rated poorly by students have reasons: arguments about the time of day the class meets, the number of students in the class, race, creed, national origin, required or elective course, union membership, the requirements for research and scholarly productivity, the color of the rooms, whether or not a class is technically demanding or "soft," may have a modicum of validity, but only in the smallest measure.

Good teaching is fueled by the passion of faculty members towards two things.

First, their own disciplinary interests: this is why peer-reviewed research and creative activity, recognized by professional counterparts, is a critical part of faculty life. Second is the commitment of faculty members to share knowledge and wisdom for the very particular purpose of improving the abilities and insights of the student.

Students sense both of these commitments. They know when a teacher is full of baloney, and they have a honed ability to discern whether or not the faculty member cares.

Some faculty rationalize their low scores on the students' perception of their teaching ability citing the above excuses. The simple explanation is that the students see through the fluff and know the answers to the following two questions.

Does this person know something about what they are teaching?

Does this teacher care whether or not I get it?

And both are of equal importance.

At our university student quality will increase, research expenditures will grow, creative work will flourish, and students will get high scores on the Graduate Record Examination and be well placed for employment possibilities when the students answer the two questions affirmatively.

And for the faculty at our university, *"While we teach, we learn". Seneca*