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Our University – Teaching Excellence

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Our University – Teaching Excellence

First in a series on Teaching Excellence

The purpose of any university is to help people change the way they think. For example, a student who wants to be an attorney comes to the university and, in effect, says *"I want to be an attorney but I do not know how to think like an attorney… Will you help me to learn to think like an attorney?"* I have suggested this previously.

The contract between the university and the student is that we at the university will assist the student in a process of transformation that will give him, or her, the skills, critical thinking ability, knowledge, insight, and attributes that are keys to success.

This requires a bond of trust between the student and the institution, worked out through the faculty. Excellent faculty members are the tailors of this transformation.

True in any university setting, it is especially profound in a university where there are many first generation college students. There are two powerful forces being brought to bear on each student simultaneously. First, the challenge of encouraging the transformation of a student into a skilled professional is a complex process by itself.

It must be coupled with the second challenge: developing an intellectual life that supports the application of professional skills within the context of a free society. The glue that holds these two components of teaching together is a commitment to the whole student. It is crucial to the undergraduate experience, particularly for people from families who are new to higher education. The responsibility of the university goes beyond imparting professional skills as it addresses the issue of citizenship and personal responsibility, and the weight associated with both.

Robert Audi in an article in *Academe* September-October 1994 entitled, *"On the Ethics of Teaching and the Ideals of Learning",* suggests four models of teaching: didactic, apprentice, collegial, and friendship. A teacher who possesses a firm grasp of the ethical implications of any of these models can be excellent. When someone operates from all four perspectives simultaneously, he or she becomes a legend. The goal at our University should be to encourage faculty to operate from all four.

In the *didactic model* students assume that the teacher knows more than they do about the subject matter.

In the *apprentice model* the teacher works with students in a direct and unambiguous manner.

Collegial teaching occurs when a teacher embraces the students' ideas, and treats them as esteemed property. The teacher and the student become colleagues.

Friendship implies that a single area of study does not define a student. By engaging with the student as an individual with a valuable and unique perspective, a teacher can help guide him or her to a deeper understanding of what it means to lead a thoughtful life.

These aspects of excellence in teaching are further enhanced by a faculty that disseminates and applies ideas and insights. The goal of all scholarship should be to enhance the fabric of teaching quality at our university.

The university, in the end, exists for the purpose of teaching. New insights, ideas, discoveries, and applications of knowledge are the most natural by-products of an energized teaching environment.

A teacher who understood these principles responded to a column from a week ago with an observation from personal classroom experience integrating thinking and doing at the introductory level. *The students themselves were energized by the inquiry process; it allowed them the independence to pursue intellectual goals of their own while knowing that they had the guidance necessary to navigate problematic research and ideas.* Read the entire comment from AW on the web at http://walterwendler.wordpress.com/2010/08/19/our-university-%e2%80%93-what%e2%80%99s-the-big-idea/#comments.

This is teaching excellence with legs, and it is exactly what our university needs.