

MAKING THE CASE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

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In the introductory essay of *Universities and their Leadership*, a collection celebrating the 250th anniversary of Princeton, the former President of Cornell University made this claim:

We need our best scholars to be our teachers, and we need them to give the same creative energy to teaching as they give to scholarship. We need to identify, support, and reward those who teach superbly. There is no antithesis between teaching and research. Great teaching can, in fact, be a form of synthesis and scholarship. (1998, p11)

The audience for this report

These reflections were written for our colleagues in the CEHD. We hope to spark conversations rather than hand down the One and Only Way to think about the various dimensions of instructional excellence. If change takes place, it will be because each unit discusses these issues, revises its annual appraisals and P&T documents, and seeks a culture that truly values good teaching.

What did we do?

From early September 2015 through early February 2016, the six members of this Task Force read, searched for materials from other universities, surveyed our colleagues, and talked with guests from other departments and the Center for Teaching and Learning. None of us is an expert in the research literature on higher education, but we read enough to conclude that there is no consensus on the exact components of outstanding teaching. So what follows expresses our beliefs and convictions as much as it reflects the relevant literature on teaching.

What is excellence in teaching?

The way we teach often varies across different settings: graduate/undergraduate, small/large enrollment, requirements/electives, field based/classroom, online/face to face. Even so, the Task Force identified six specific qualities that excellent teachers exhibit:

--Coherent course design. A transparent alignment between course objectives, instructional activities, and assessments should be a hallmark of excellent teaching. These choices should be not mysterious, and the rationale for course designs should be more than past practice or personal whim. Students should be able to see and understand how and why the goals, activities, and assessments connect.

--Evidence that students benefitted. Outstanding teachers don't just assume that they succeeded. They collect and analyze evidence to see how well the students learned the course material.

--Rapport. This can be a slippery word—is it just likability or popularity? We hope not—close relationships with students, if valuable in themselves, are primarily a means to the end of serious academic work.

--Multiple models of instruction. Excellent teachers make use of a repertoire of instructional strategies to engage learners and meet the varying needs of their students. The skill set includes the appropriate use of technology and also encompasses older pedagogical methods that predate computers.

--Social media. As learning becomes more independent, mobile, and social, instructors need to find ways to engage “digital natives” who are technologically savvy. This is not to say that every instructor must use specific technologies, but it does seem necessary to do more than talk within a classroom, rely on chalk, or limit instruction to the 35 scheduled face-to-face course hours.

--Leadership. Instructors should share what they know. Their influence could enhance their colleagues' teaching, their department's programs, or instruction in the University of Delaware or beyond our campus.

Ways to document excellence in teaching

Scholarly Teaching Scholarly teaching is when faculty use research and theory to inform instructional decisions and course design. When making a case for excellence in teaching based on scholarly approaches to teaching, a statement of teaching philosophy describes in detail the theory and research used to inform one's work and explains how those ideas shaped a course.

Reflective Practice Instructors formulate a problem of practice to solve, change their teaching to address this problem, and then determine whether the change was an improvement. Reflection involves the use of data from students to improve instruction—both during the semester (revising the course for those students) and after the semester (revisions for future students).

To articulate a case for excellence in teaching based on reflective practice, an instructor would describe the problem she was trying to solve, the improvements that addressed the problems, the evidence used to determine whether or not the changes were improvements, and any additional changes that are warranted.

Striving for excellence is an important part of excellence. Even the most outstanding instructors continue to refine what they do.

Scholarship of Teaching Studying one's own teaching becomes scholarship when the process is informed by theory and prior research; when data are collected and analyzed thoroughly to determine if changes are improvements; and if the findings can be useful beyond the local setting, either for contributing to theoretical understandings or helping others learn from the practical implications.

When articulating a claim to excellence in teaching based on the scholarship of teaching, a faculty member can provide various products—articles, presentations, conference papers, software and so on. An explicit discussion of the nature of the contribution should accompany the artifacts.

Peer Review To argue for excellence in teaching based on peer review, a faculty member would describe the peer review process and explain what was learned. The faculty member might also share how he or she applied what was learned. It could also be useful to solicit the perspectives of the colleague who participated in the peer review.

Within the committee and among our colleagues, opinions differed on the merits of peer reviews of teaching. Those who supported it thought it would be particularly valuable for new faculty, but even so there was agreement that the rubrics, endorsed by the entire unit, reflect a shared consensus of what constitutes good teaching. Otherwise the reviews could be discounted as flawed, incomplete, or biased.

On the other hand, peer review does not have to be evaluative to be useful. It can take the form of peer coaching where instructors pair with each other for mutual observations and reflections on what they learned. In this approach, the instructors are teachers and the observers are students.

Course evaluations A one-size-fits-all evaluation form is inappropriate in light of the wide range of instructional settings, from huge lecture classes to small seminars to field-based mentoring. Each instructor should be able to tailor the course evaluation to fit the particulars of the course. However, we believe that the evaluation should address the connection between the course objectives, the instructional activities, and what the students learned. The evaluation should include specific questions for each course objective.

The evaluations should not be a popularity contest—a mediocre teacher can be well-liked—nor should they ask students to answer questions beyond their competence (for instance, the instructor’s knowledge of the subject matter). Moreover, we think that mid-semester evaluations should be encouraged, perhaps required, so instructors can use them formatively to adjust their practice during the semester.

Evidence beyond course evaluations should be an important part of annual appraisals and promotion/contract renewal dossiers. The current P&T guidelines offer a wide range of options, but we would like to add one more: include a representative sample of the tests, quizzes, paper assignments, and whatever else was graded (as long as the items are not proprietary or copyrighted). Just seeing a syllabus does not reveal the crucial matter of the caliber of the required work assigned by the instructor.

Scholarly Habits of Mind

The same painstaking concern for evidence and logic that we demonstrate in our research should also characterize how we document our teaching effectiveness. There should be ample and solid evidence beyond course evaluations to support the claims set forth, evidence that can be scrutinized by others rather than taken on faith. Whenever possible, faculty could share these analyses not just in their annual appraisals or promotion dossiers, but in other outlets where good practices are disseminated—journals, editorials, blogs, conferences, textbook, instructional videos, and so on.