Teaching Disrespect

Learning at Harvard

You get a ﬁrst sense of the amount of attention paid to teaching at the College by the fact that Harvard felt the need to launch a “Teaching and Learning Initiative.” You don’t hear about the Red Sox launching a “Winning the World Series Initiative” or Charlie Sheen launching a slightly- simpler “Winning Initiative”—winning is a core part of their identity, not something they have to initiate.

You get a second sense by the fact that this initiative was actually launched four years ago and has languished incognito until now. At a poorly-attended faculty meeting in March, 2007, the few faculty in attendance received the “Compact on Teaching and Learning” with disdain. An applauded remark by Professor of Latin Katherine M. Coleman lay the blame, as always, at the feet of distracted and disinterested students: “Some students don’t come to class, or they come late, or they surf the Web during lectures or even sections, I’ve noticed.” Obviously if someone fails to appreciate the wisdom and clarity of your remarks, the fault must surely be theirs. But props for noticing!

You get a third sense by observing that the College picked up this initiative during a period of budget crisis, precisely at the moment when there are few resources to devote to it. I should give credit where credit is due, however, and point out that in a single year they did manage to organize three—count them—colloquia to discuss this important subject.

But if you want to follow this disinterest to the source, go to graduate school. Graduate school is where future academics learn their disrespect for teaching.

Graduate students are taught that teaching is easy. One half-day course at the Bok Center—all my department required—and you’re ready to teach section as a teaching fellow. Teach section for one class in a six year Ph.D. program—all my department required—and you’re ready to teach undergraduates as a junior faculty member. As a result, most future academics (including myself) enter their ﬁrst academic position not knowing how to design a class, write a full set of lectures, or balance our time between research and instruction.

Graduate students are taught that teaching is not important. The reason graduate students aren’t required to teach more is that faculty want them in the lab or the library doing research. Research is what earns you a job, tenure, and worldwide renown; teaching is a distraction. Graduate students with an interest in teaching hear warning after warning that this is not the right thing to do. “You’ve taught enough.” “You need more papers on your resume, not another class.” “Why are you so interested in teaching? Is your research going OK?”

Departments even establish incentives to discourage graduate students from teaching. I was required to teach one semester, and when I chose to keep teaching I was not paid for my labors. Instead, the money I would have received was routed to the my adviser, to pay him for my “lost” research productivity. Of course, the research papers still had to get written, and so at the end of the day I was working harder than I would have been doing research alone and being paid the

same amount.

Finally, graduate students are taught that teaching is unrewarding. Researched-obsessed faculty consistently deﬁne impact in ways that bring them either extra attention, money, or—ideally—both. Few seem excited by the chance to inspire young minds, or driven to direct their considerable creative and analytical powers towards transforming the learning process. My former department has senior faculty who have contributed in many ways to the broader Harvard community, but none of them stepped forward to transform CS50.

In reality, teaching isn’t what graduate students are taught. Teaching is challenging, and only becoming more so as technology changes the educational landscape. Change has always meant that teacher and student learn somewhat differently, but today the pace of technological advance has widened this gap substantially. Yet, even computer scientists are still delivering lectures as if there was no YouTube, giving PowerPoint presentations as if there was no iPad, and designing assignments as if there was no Wikipedia.

Teaching is important, and while that alone may sound somewhat obvious, teaching is also important at research universities. If we don’t ﬁnd a way to rebalance the incentives to ensure that Harvard faculty are creative and accomplished both as teachers and as researchers, then at some point prospective students and their families are going to see through the myth that just hobnobbing with Rock Star Faculty constitutes a good education.

So do these mythical creatures exist, the researcher who can teach, the teacher who can do research? You might as well ask, are there baseball players that can both hit and play defense, or is Charlie Sheen really capable of winning both here and there. Teaching, like winning, is challenging, important, and fundamentally rewarding. But if we want to develop a new generation of dynamic college educators, we have to start by changing what they are taught in school.

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