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The Great Teachers

The advantage that the researcher has over the teacher in gaining repute outside his own institution has been increased in recent years by the large amounts of external money available for research, the national review system under which much of that money is granted, and the emphasis given to research by federal agencies and universities. Recent reports, comments, and editorials from a variety of sources have warned that a better balance must soon be restored. Teaching, of course, may best be combined with research, but the inevitable increase in college enrollment, the need to provide an excellent education for the next generation of teachers and researchers, and widening acceptance of the importance of full development of talent all call for more emphasis on good teaching.

In the short run, various means can be used to increase the number of teachers, but the basic problem cannot be solved unless the status of teaching is enhanced in the eyes of present and prospective faculty members and the supporters of higher education. One point is clear: the status of teaching is not going to be enhanced by lowering the status of research. Any attempt in that direction would deservedly fail. A second point is clear: if great teaching is to be rewarded, the great teachers must be identified. And here there is a problem for those who contend that the quality of teaching is unmeasurable.

Given enough time, students, measurements, and statistical analysis, we might determine the qualitative improvement in the streams of students who pass through the classes of different teachers. But this approach is impracticable; any realistic effort to identify the outstanding teachers must depend upon the judgment of qualified observers. Three kinds of judges have been used. Judgments are frequently made by faculty colleagues, but the man being judged often can make the just complaint that his colleagues know little about what goes on in his classroom. Administrative officers also pass judgment on teaching quality, but a spy from the president's office is seldom welcome in the classroom. Sometimes student ratings are used. Some teachers rebel at the idea of being graded by their students, but others testify that students discriminate well and that, if given the responsibility, they judge on quality and not on popularity.

Yet the fact must be faced: if the prestige of teaching is to be enhanced, there must be agreement on who the good teachers are. As a start, it should be possible on any campus to collect independent ratings, preferably on firsthand evidence rather than on hearsay. If it turns out that there is reasonably high consistency in the judgments, good; the point has been made that the ablest teachers can be identified. If there is no satisfactory consistency, that is another story, but at least the effort would be good local propaganda for calling attention to the importance of teaching.

The teacher who wishes for enhanced status must therefore make a choice. He can cooperate in efforts to see if the ablest teachers can be identified reliably. If that turns out to be the case, then rewards, privileges, and other means of enhancing prestige can follow. Or he can insist that good teaching is essentially a private and unmeasurable affair. But he cannot hold this view, plead that the ablest teachers be given special recognition, and also honor consistency.

—DAEL WOLFLE