Letters

Identifying Great Teachers

The editorial by Dael Wolfle ("The great teachers," 11 Dec. 1964, p. 1421) is timely and should be of great interest to all who teach and all who learn. Many of our great teachers go unrecognized by all save their own students. Especially in the smaller universities and colleges, the better teachers are known only by the students with whom they come in contact.

I would take issue, however, with the way in which Wolfle would evaluate professors. . . . I would suggest that the evaluation be based on surveys of former students, not current students. Current students have no valid criteria for judgment on the overall effectiveness of teaching. An alumnus has had a period of experience in which to compare his training with that of others. He is also removed from present pressures and peeves. He is likely to remember vividly the good teachers and the bad teachers, and the others gradually merge in a gray area in between. It is true that a survey of alumni would be more difficult and expensive than a campus survey, but any school seriously bent on evaluation and identification of the best teachers should be willing to undertake such a survey.

These suggestions are merely a difference in method, not in intent. We agree on the need for recognition of our better teachers.

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Wolfle's argument is roughly . . . that the necessary enhancement of the status of good teachers . . . presupposes the identifiability of such teachers; that the validity of this presupposition is in doubt, and that we must begin to test it; that, finally, the teacher "who wishes for enhanced status" must "cooperate in efforts to see if the ablest teachers can be identified reliably" or else, holding that "good teaching is essentially a private and unmeasurable affair," give up his hope for such enhancement. What is left out here is, obviously, any attempt to characterize "good" teaching. The omission is understandable; in so short a compass, Wolfle could scarcely have addressed this question. It is a nonetheless regrettable omission; for, if we continue to talk to each other in this way, we shall before long forget that we have never discovered what good teaching is. The nation's schools of education long ago made precisely this mistake; the results have been catastrophic, and I should not like to see our scientists repeat the performance. . . .

There are various competitive conceptions, of a more or less unreflected and certainly preoperational sort, of what good teaching is. Wolfle hints at some of these in suggesting lines along which measurement might be attempted: good teaching is that which excites the admiration of one's students, or of one's colleagues, or of one's administrative associates. Notice that the only alternatives he offers rest upon a single *fundamentum divisionis*: a conscious, introspectively identifiable, personal response, or something of the sort. What is likely to happen is that some clever investigator will seize upon one or another of these unsophisticated and intuitive conceptions, learn how to measure in respect of it, and by that very success establish it as *the* conception of good teaching. Once entrenched, the conception will be extirpated only with the greatest difficulty; it will tend to displace competitive conceptions which may be of far greater moment. . . .

Let us bear fixedly in mind how little we really understand of teaching, good and bad. What warrant have we for the belief that even the good student (whom we equally ill understand) recognizes a good teacher as such? Does the latter recognize himself? Are the results of excellence in teaching manifest at all while the student is still in school? Do good students actually have any real need of teachers? I am well aware of the impatience with which most investigators view such questions; they regard them as mere quibbles, which only impede the forward progress of the inquiry. It is true that a penchant for unattainable precision of conception can divert a thinker from constructive theorizing. Some part of the scientist's art consists in his knowing when a conception is well enough worked out to justify employing it, devising means of measurement in respect of it, and so on.

I therefore reject Wolfle's dilemma. It is far too early to begin to devise means of measuring excellence in teaching and of identifying good teachers; it would be equally premature to assert that good teaching is "private and unmeasurable." Let us first do what we can to decide among ourselves what good teaching *is*, what it is *like*, what *sort* of thing it is. Perhaps then we shall be able to determine its susceptibility of measurement.

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. . . Able teachers can be identified, I believe, on the basis of responses from two groups of listeners. The more reliable is comprised of the above-average (serious) students, 3 to 5 years *after* having taken a course with the individual in question. The second group consists of the teacher's colleagues who listen carefully when he presents seminars in his own specialty. Such information is really not difficult to obtain.

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Biomedical Sciences in Europe

You have recently published two highly intelligent—and highly critical—articles about the state of the biomedical sciences in Western Continental Europe (V. K. McElheny, 14 Aug. 1964, p. 690; R. P. Grant, C. P. Huttrer, C. G. Metzner, 23 Oct. 1964, p. 493). By their support of reform and of the diversion of external funds into European biology, these articles may do much good. But they should