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ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

From the Office of Associate Dean

Encouraging Candidates to Talk about Teaching

What happens when candidates come to interview for faculty positions? Do they give a presentation on their research? Do they meet everybody who's anything and hear lots of hype about the community? Do they teach a class and/or meet with students?

These questions should get us thinking about how we assess the instructional competence and potential of candidates at the interview stage. Do we do enough, or all that we could do? In most cases the answer is no, even at institutions committed to instructional missions. Most of the time we are far more concerned with candidates' content competence than their instructional prowess.

Miami-Dade Community College faculty answer a series of questions when they prepare teaching portfolios which are used to assess them for advancement. They must include a narrative in which the following questions are addressed:

- What challenging [instructional] goals have I set for myself, and what progress have I made toward attaining them?
- How do I motivate students?
- How do I interact positively with colleagues and students?
- How do I create a climate conducive for learning?

- How do I update my own knowledge, professional skills and resources to make my instruction meaningful (professional growth activities)?
- How do I meet or support the individual learning needs of students?
- What information do I have that shows my students' achievement or the effectiveness of my service?

For some of us, a set of questions like this just whets the appetite for other important questions about teaching and learning that should be thought about by all of us but which certainly would be interesting to hear a candidate's views on:

- How do you assess student learning, and what is your justification for these approaches?
- What do you consider the key elements of successful course design?
- Describe your favorite assignment and explain the educational rationale behind it.
- What's the most influential source you've read on teaching and/or learning?
- How would you deal with classrooms where students typically fall into one of two groups: those very well prepared or those hardly prepared at all?
- How do you promote academic integrity in your course?
- If you meet a student five years after that student has taken your course, what would you like that student to remember about your course? Can you identify some specific aspects of your instruction that help to ensure this is what a student remembers?

Perhaps a subset of these questions could be shared with the candidates prior to the on-campus interview. Responses could be part of a seminar, or shared over lunch with faculty and students. (Do we include undergraduates and graduate students in our faculty selection process?)

Answers to these questions are not easy, but why should the candidate think that their teaching ability can be summarized by "nice visuals at seminar" or "talks well in front of group"? If we value teaching, we need to send that signal during the selection process.

Adapted from an article in *The Teaching Professor*, August/September 1997, based on the Teaching/Learning Project at Miami-Dade Community College.

Learning Communities

The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities published its first report in April 1997, *Returning to our Roots: The Student Experience*. A major part of that report addressed learning communities as a part of the Commission's vision for the future. The guiding principles for academic reform, included on page four, begins with the university (and college and department) defining itself as a "learning community." And learning communities must be "student-centered." The following is adapted from the Kellogg Commission report.

Learning Communities. Under our definition, a learning community serves as the foundation of a learning society. It is committed to meeting the needs of students and it respects the learning needs of the faculty as much as it encourages students to work as apprentice researchers. In such a community, all activities and responsibilities are related. Students, staff, and faculty come to see themselves as engaged in a common enterprise. Above all, the quality of learning is nearly inseparable from the experience of functioning as an integral part of the community itself. As we understand the term, learning is not something reserved for classrooms or degree programs. It is available to every member of the academic community, whether in the classroom or the administration building, the laboratory or the library, the residence hall or the performing arts center, the field house or the extension field office. Learning is available to all—potentially to everyone in the state seeking intellectual nourishment—and all serve learning.

The university's mosaic of teaching, research, and service is available to the entire academic community; to potential students and their families and friends; to the region's schools, and their students and staff; and to a host of constituencies with important stakes in our performance—graduates, taxpayers, government, business and industry, and foundations and diverse cultural communities.

To create such a community and satisfy public expectations about our performance, our institutions must strive to continue to be centers of excellence, committed to firm standards and high expectations; known for the excellence of their teaching; and respected for the competence of their graduates. At the same time, they must be financially accessible to those we are responsible for serving; major resources of high-quality research and scholarship; and prudent stewards of public resources.

Whether we fall short of these ambitious aims is beside the point. The point is to pursue them relentlessly. Our reach should exceed our grasp. In setting out to create learning communities, we embark on a journey that has no end.

What matters is not so much the destination but an unflinching commitment to excellence in meeting learners' needs.

Student-Centered Universities. A learning community is student-centered. It cannot be anything else. For only a student-centered approach has any hope of creating the kind of dynamic learning environment, both in and out of the classroom, required in a learning community. If we can get that right, the rest of it will take care of itself. If we cannot, the rest of it will be all wrong.

Actions speak louder than words. A student-centered approach compels changes in attitudes, orientation, and responsibilities for every member of the academic community—faculty, staff, and students. It imposes additional expectations on all involved, in student life and services and extracurricular activities as much as in the classroom.

In a student-centered university, our tasks must include helping all students develop essential life skills and values: critical thinking; knowing how to learn; effective oral and written communication; a multicultural and global perspective; respect for individuals and the sources of their individuality; civic and individual responsibility; self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of one's own

competence; and leadership and the ability to work well with others, either as a leader or a member of a team. We want to stress that values deserve special attention in this effort. The biggest educational challenge we face revolves around developing character, conscience, citizenship, tolerance, civility, and individual and social responsibility in our students. We dare not ignore this obligation in a society that sometimes gives the impression that virtues such as these are discretionary. These should be part of the standard equipment of our graduates, not options.

Finally, learning is not a spectator sport. While it is the faculty member's role to teach, it is the student's to learn. Independent learners are active, not passive. We must introduce many more students to research, as junior collaborators with faculty members and graduate students and as seekers and inventors of new knowledge in their own right. And we must introduce all students—and, in particular, first-year students—to classroom experiences that stretch their intellectual horizons and require them to exercise analytical muscles most of them never knew they had.

We understand that all of that is a very tall order. We also know that we will not succeed with every student on every dimension. But if we turn our attention seriously to these issues, our successes will far outnumber our failures. Above all, we will have prepared our students for a lifetime of learning and challenge.

The Problems of Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning approaches share three common features:

- 1.) They are student-centered;**
- 2.) Teachers function as facilitator rather than disseminator; and**
- 3.) Problems serve as the stimulus for learning. "Good" problems are the key to**

successful learning of content but also the understanding of the process used to solve the problem (find the answer). The process is a transferable skill, to be used long after the original problem is resolved (or no longer important).

Wilkerson and Gijsselaers offer four characteristics of good problems (from *The Teaching Professor*, August/September 1998).

Learning outcomes should be holistic, not divided by narrow disciplinary boundaries. Disciplinary boundaries are largely a construct of academic convenience. In practice, there is no such thing as a "marketing problem." Any action taken in the marketing area of the firm impinges on the operational area and the financial area. Students need to learn how to deal with complex, interconnected problems that can best be addressed with complex, interconnected solutions.

Problems should mirror professional practice. The idea here is to develop authentic problems, like those professionals face in every work situation. The goal is to give students experience that is relevant to what they will in fact be doing as professionals and to do that in a context where they can be given the kind of feedback that will foster their development. Student internships can be an excellent source of authentic problems.

Problems should be ill-structured. Students need to develop the ability to confront ambiguous, ill-defined situations and make sense of them. They need to be able to recall concepts and techniques and apply them in this sense-making process. Students must develop the ability to ask the right questions and to determine what information is needed to frame the situation.

Problems should be contemporary. This is another way of saying the problems should be relevant. They should

present issues that students see as real, authentic, and stimulating.

**My soul can find no staircase to heaven unless it be through earth's loveliness.
Michelangelo**

Pondering Powerpoint

Thinking about going high tech, from the chalkboard or overhead transparencies to PowerPoint? Here are some tips on making the transition a smooth one (from The Teaching Professor, August/September, 1998).

- **Keep it simple. PowerPoint presentations can contain pictures, sound, and even video clips. These take file space, facilities, and expertise. First, create your basic course outline in text. Then update and embellish later.**
 - **Design materials and exams so students do not just memorize the notes and ignore the book and additional lecture points. Complete lecture notes can offer students a minimalist's study alternative. Leave out words here and there and include some unanswered questions so students must attend to fill in the blanks.**
 - **Test the equipment in the classroom before you use it. Sit in the back row of the empty room. Now try different font sizes and colors, fiddle with the light switches, and move the projector around until you are happy with the view.**
 - **Be flexible during the semester. Lost cords, runaway mice, burned out bulbs and down computers will be a part of your lectures. Computers are not fool-proof; take your chalk and notes to class.**
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A Statement of Principles to Guide Academic Reform

Preamble. This institution is committed to higher education as a public trust. It supports the state and land-grant ethic of service to students, communities, and states through teaching, research, and public service as a statement of that trust. In support of that commitment, this university and its stakeholders— students, faculty, staff, administrators, board members, and friends— consider the following principles to be major statements of the values guiding us as we enter the 21st century.

I. A Learning Community. This university defines itself as a learning community, one that supports and inspires academic growth and learning among faculty, staff, students, and learners of all kinds, on-campus and off. Learning serves all of them; and all of them serve learning. Oriented around learners' needs, this university is committed to maintaining a first-rate environment for learning.

II. Access and Opportunity. As one of the public colleges and universities responsible for granting two-thirds of all the bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States, this institution is dedicated to maintaining the widest possible access to the benefits of a college education.

III. An Education of Value. This university will provide graduates with an education that fits them with the skills, attitudes, and values required for success in life, citizenship, and work or further education.

IV. Containing Costs. This institution is dedicated to containing its costs.

V. Accountability. This institution is a prudent steward of public resources, conscious of the need to maintain and improve quality while containing costs. It will also investigate a variety of emerging mechanisms to assess the outcomes of the student experience.

VI. Meeting New Needs. As telecommunications and other technologies revolutionize American life and

many non-traditional students seek access to this learning community, this university is committed to developing distance-learning techniques and extended evening and weekend offerings to meet the widest variety of student needs.

VII. Flexibility and Responsiveness. This institution is committed to developing new partnerships and collaborations and improving governance structures so that it can meet its teaching, research, and service obligations more effectively, work with its many stakeholders more efficiently, and respond to change and emerging needs more flexibly.

--Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, April 1997

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