Volume 3
Issue 2
February
2011

Lander University's

White Board

Article submissions encouraged.
Send articles to: sgrund@lander.edu

Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Our Superficial Scholars

FOR MOST OF THE past 20 years I have served on selection committees for the Rhodes Scholarship. In general, the experience is an annual reminder of the tremendous promise of America's next generation. We interview the best graduates of U.S. universities for one of the most prestigious honors that can be bestowed on young scholars.

I have, however, become increasingly concerned in recent years - not about the talent of the applicants but about the education American universities are providing. Even from America's great liberal arts colleges, transcripts reflect an undergraduate specialization that would have been unthinkably narrow just a generation ago.

As a result, high-achieving students seem less able to grapple with issues that require them to think across disciplines or reflect on difficult questions about what matters and why.

Unlike many graduate fellowships, the Rhodes seeks leaders who will "fight the world's fight." They must be more than mere bookworms. We are looking for students who wonder, students who are reading widely, students of passion who are driven to make a difference in the lives of those around them and in the broader world through enlightened and effective leadership. The undergraduate education they are receiving seems less and less suited to that purpose.

An outstanding biochemistry major wants to be a doctor and supports the president's health-care bill but doesn't really know why. A student who started a chapter of Global Zero at his university hasn't really thought about whether a world in which great powers have divested themselves of nuclear weapons would be more stable or less so, or whether nuclear deterrence can ever be moral. A young service academy cadet who is likely to be serving in a war zone within the year believes there are things worth dying for but doesn't seem to have thought much about what is worth killing for. A student who wants to study comparative government doesn't seem to know much about the important features and limitations of America's Constitution.

When asked what are the important things for a leader to be able to do, one young applicant described some techniques and personal characteristics to manage a group and get a job done. Nowhere in her answer did she give any hint of understanding that leaders decide what job should be done. Leaders set agendas.

I wish I could say that this is a single, anomalous group of students, but the trend is unmistakable. Our great universities seem to have redefined what it means to be an exceptional student. They are producing top students who have given very little thought to matters beyond their impressive grasp of an intense area of study.

This narrowing has resulted in a curiously unprepared and superficial pre-professionalism.

Perhaps our universities have yielded to the pressure of parents who pay high tuition and expect students, above all else, to be prepared for the jobs they will try to secure after graduation. As a parent of two teenagers I can understand that expectation.

Perhaps faculty members are themselves more narrowly specialized because of pressure to publish original work in ever more obscure journals.

I detect no lack of seriousness or ambition in these students. They believe they are exceptionally well-educated. They have jumped expertly through every hoop put in front of them to be the top of their classes in our country's best universities, and they have been lavishly praised for doing so. They seem so surprised when asked simple direct questions that they have never considered.

We are blessed to live in a country that values education. Many of our young people spend four years getting very expensive college degrees. But our universities fail them and the nation if they continue to graduate students with expertise in biochemistry, mathematics or history without teaching them to think about what problems are important and why.

The writer represented New Mexico in the U.S. House from 1997 to 2008. She is a graduate of the Air Force Academy and a Rhodes scholar.

Heather Wilson, Our Superficial Scholars, The Washington Post, January 23, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/21/AR2011012104554.html], January 25, 2011

Midterm Week - Feb. 21
Spring Break - Feb. 28 - Mar. 4
Faculty Meeting - Feb. 23

WHITE BOARD
2010-11 Publication Dates
First Monday of the Month

September 6	March 7
October 4	April 4
November 1	May 2
December 6	June 6
January 4	July 5
February 7	August 1

Newsletters Archive HERE

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching
Carnel Learning Center, Suite106.
Phone: 388-8426

Give Students the Gift of Ethics

THE HEIGHT THAT a structure can achieve is limited by the strength of its foundation. Therefore, I suggest that university students should be provided with a strong foundation concerning the true nature of ethics, where they come from, the role that one's ethics play in virtually all of life's decisions and the benefits of living according to a personal set of ethical principles or form of ethical reasoning. Unfortunately, this rarely happens. Instead, students are often subjected to a sort of an informal academic and social regime that misinforms the students, and denigrates the value and the use of true ethical principles.

Teach your students that our true ethics are reflected in our behavior and our behavioral boundaries. A person's set of ethics or manner of ethical reasoning flows from his individual values, which are those ideas, beliefs, reasons and relationships that he holds most precious, that which will not be surrendered for the sake of expediency and if necessary will be defended with sacrifice. Fidelity to our own freely chosen set of ethics or manner of ethical reasoning is an affirmation of our individual values. Beware that students often have difficulty grasping the concept of values, because they have not been encouraged to think freely about what they truly value above all else. This self-questioning should be part of learning about ethics.

Teach your students that the choice of one's set of ethics or manner of ethical reasoning is the free choice of one's own standards of personal conduct and, as such, is the greatest act of individuality and freedom. Teach them that our individual ethical standards are those ties by which we freely bind ourselves to act within certain boundaries toward our fellow creatures and ourselves. Those freely chosen ties are the truest expression of our humanity, that which makes us different from baser creatures. Beware that students often have difficulty grasping the concept of freely chosen self-restraint, because they wrongly believe that freedom only exists in the absence of any restraint.

Teach your students that our freely chosen ethics are our source of strength to resist the tyranny of the supposed consensus, the emotional draw of the mob, the intimidation of the collective and the pull of ignoble emotions. Only by holding a set of ethical principles inviolate can an individual have the strength and fortitude to walk the path less traveled. Beware that students often have difficulty grasping this, because they have been taught that submission to the opinions of others is a virtue, and self-confidence in one's own reasoning is a flaw.

Teach them that so-called situational ethics are the absence of true ethics. To separate your personal ethics from your "business ethics" is the antithesis of having ethics. Without having a defined set of ethics, there is nothing for one to stand by, to base one's integrity on. Beware that students often have difficulty grasping this concept, because they have been told that social norms, individual values and ethics are merely one in the same, constantly changing, based on convenience, and relative—and therefore subject to compromise if not total abandonment.

If you teach these things well to your students, you will have bestowed upon them a precious gift, for you will surely have kindled a fire in their minds and hearts. It is likely that your students will actually show interest in discussions of various ethical standards and ethical approaches, and will develop a mature understanding of ethics and perhaps a better understanding of themselves. Your students will be able to identify and intelligently discuss the values and ethical principles that fictional characters and real people displayed. Novels, biographies, autobiographies, histories and poetry can then be better understood as sources of ethical insight into the nature of human challenges and decisions, and the consequences of human behavior. Most important, you will have provided a means to resist those seeking to exploit ill-informed students with trite and attractive sounding phrases that easily can be used to justify any intrusion upon the rights of another.

Dr. Douglas G. Campbell is with Walden University's School of Management, College of Management and Technology. He can be reached at douglas.campbell@waldenu.edu.

Dr. Douglas G. Campbell, Give Students the Gift of Ethics, National Association of Scholars, January 20, 2011, [http://www.nas.org/polArticles.cfm?Doc_Id=1769], January 25, 2011.

Presenting vs. Teaching

THERE'S A FUNDAMENTAL difference between presenting a research talk at a meeting and teaching. What's different about teaching a class vs. giving a research presentation? The [list] given below helps to compare and contrast to the differences in these modes of information transfer:

Presenting a research talk
- High level of audience understanding can be assumed
- No real responsibility for the audience.
- Clear delivery expected, but not mandatory.
- Subject matter delivered can be technical without extensive explanation of details.
- Short (15-30 min), highly specific information intensive presentation.
- Often a "take home message" is the main goal.

Teaching in the classroom
- High level of understanding of the material cannot be assumed.
- Responsible for student understanding.
- Responsible for clear delivery.
- Extremely technical information may be too challenging for the course.
- Collection of longer (minimum 50 min) lectures designed to build a broad, integrated understanding of the material.
- Complete command of the material is the goal.

Other than the obvious mechanical and technical differences between teaching and presenting, a sense of responsibility for student understanding is the most conspicuous. In general, the overall student learning performance in a course is the responsibility of the instructor of that course. We can always complain that the students 'just don't get it!', but ultimately the responsibility for student understanding always comes back to rest with the instructor. Be prepared to go back to the drawing board to fine tune your delivery or teaching approach if large numbers of students are having troubles.

Dr. Bruce Manning, Promoting Reflection, Orientation to College Teaching, Center for the Enhancement of Teaching, San Francisco State University, [http://oct.sfsu.edu/implementation/reflection/htmls/strategies.html], January 25, 2011