



Opinion Forum

MAKING TEACHING A PRIORITY

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Football and gardening are activities I don't understand. I don't even know enough about these things to be confused by them. But teaching is something I know enough about to be confused. Specifically, I wonder about why improving instruction at Oakland University isn't as important as it might be.

There appears to be a disconnect between OU's stakeholders—its students and taxpayers—and the institutional attitude to improving instruction. The stakeholders trust OU with millions every year, and more important, students trust us with their futures, saying in effect, “Educate me, so that I may improve my life.” However, my own unit, the School of Business Administration, seems to emphasize research at the expense of teaching, and I suspect this is the case in other units at the university as well.

I've been here since 1991, and I've worked with many people from other academic fields, on committees, research, and other service responsibilities. I have also seen department chairs come and go, along with deans, provosts, and presidents (though admittedly, fewer of the last two categories than the first two). But I can't recall a single one who made improving instruction a systemic priority, that is, who tried to structure a department or school specifically to encourage instructional

improvement. I can't even remember one of them starting a broad conversation on the topic.

"Not so!" you may protest. "We have an assessment committee, and it's the dean who makes us do it." But does assessment really improve classroom instruction? I've helped assessment committees write surveys and administer tests. There wasn't much serious scholarship in that work. Admittedly, my assessment experience is limited. There may be good stuff out there. But a day spent reading in one's field would yield more guidance on improving instruction than the assessment studies I have seen.

I haven't known the PTB (powers that be) to spend much time or money on improving instruction, except for a few things, like the faculty learning groups, the teaching and learning committee, and the OU-Windsor teaching conference. Notably, our university has no Teaching and Learning Center, unlike the University of Windsor, which has a Higher Education Teaching Program.

However, instruction in the new School of Medicine (SOM) is an exception. SOM Dean Folberg hired faculty who are skilled as educators. Further, the only full-time instructional designers at OU—that I know about—are in the SOM. Others might be hidden by my vast veil of ignorance. Why wouldn't the PTB implement strategies for improving instruction to show greater responsiveness to our most important stakeholders? I don't know.

Faculty attitudes towards instruction are even stranger. In the SBA, tenure and promotion are based primarily on research. This means publishing in content-area journals—accounting journals, management journals, etc. But beneath the surface, a different picture emerges.

About five years ago, we did a survey on where faculty thought the SBA should go. There was a question on what part of their jobs SBA faculty were most passionate about. About half of the school's 60 or so faculty completed the survey. Most of those answered the "passion" question by saying teaching

was their greatest passion, along with their concern for their students.

Despite this, the official line in SBA is that “research is more important than teaching,” even though the faculty state that they care more about teaching than research. Perhaps this is not surprising, since it can be common for organizational and individual goals to differ. But—get ready for the plot twist—*the official line was created by the faculty!* It wasn’t imposed by the PTB. Odd.

Since then, I’ve been asking SBA faculty individually about teaching. Most are willing to engage in conversations about teaching and such talks even seem to be the norm in one SBA subculture. However, some SBA faculty lower their voices when speaking of such things. They seem afraid that others would discover their interest in good teaching

So where are we? Students spend thousands, trusting us with their education and their futures. The PTB could do more to emphasize teaching excellence across the university, beyond the new School of Medicine, which at its inception, has made quality teaching a priority. SBA faculty are passionate about teaching as individuals, but collectively they don’t act that way. Like $1+1=3$, the lack of focus on good teaching and the university’s responsibility to its shareholders, don’t add up.