Teaching Perceptions by a College of Agriculture Faculty

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ABSTRACT

In human activities such as teaching, perceptions of reality can influence outcomes whether or not these perceptions are supported by empirical evidence. Our objectives were to determine what perceptions about teaching our faculty hold in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at the University of Arkansas. To do so, we surveyed 70 of our colleagues twice in 1992 and 1 yr later in 1993. Results indicate that our faculty believe good teaching does not receive the recognition and compensation it deserves and that faculty are not rewarded for time spent on student advising. They believe that faculty and department heads are more dedicated to teaching than are other administrators. These faculty are also concerned with the time they spend teaching. The average teaching assignment of those surveyed is 29%, but the perceived time actually spent in teaching averages more than 40%. In spite of lack of recognition and reward for teaching, these teachers have positive perceptions about their own dedication to teaching and that of their department heads, and they profess to enjoy teaching.

The way we perceive our responsibilities as college teachers and the compensation for teaching contribute to the way we do our jobs. Whether or not perceptions coincide with reality is a moot point. What we think is true is highly influential in motivating human activities such as teaching and learning where a complex of perceptions often determines the way we teach and the outcomes of that teaching. Perceptions such as those about our students, about what constitutes success, about what curriculum or teaching technique is best, and about the rewards for teaching—all affect teaching activities.

The rewards for teaching are variously derived from merit increases in salaries, administrative and peer recognition, awards or release time, and appreciation from students. Personal satisfaction from teaching is not directly correlated with salary or with awards for teaching, and promotions in academic rank do not appear to result from good teaching. Schwartz (1992) surveyed the 57 winners of teaching awards at Berkeley from 1980 to 1989 for their perceptions about the values derived from their awards. He found that the awards had little or no influence on their teaching or professional advancement. One award winner declared that the apparent correlation between the award and advancement was an illusion. Schwartz asserted that “...what will have an effect upon faculty members' behavior is their perception about the rewards for good teaching, rather than the pronouncements of officials.”

THE TEACHING-RESEARCH BALANCE

Perceptions about teaching and its rewards are commonly reported in the literature and are often juxtaposed against perceptions about research. In reviewing much of this literature, Elrick (1990) reported that academics value research as their primary work, “even if they do no research themselves.” Among other ideas, she gleaned from the literature that college faculty work an average of 53 h/wk, and they do research because it interests them. She says they are most faculty enjoy teaching. The difference between interests and enjoy is indistinct, but may indicate that faculty do distinguish between their respective attraction for teaching and research. Elmore (1989) asserts that “…serious discussion, inquiry, and rigorous thought about teaching and learning are considered beneath the professional concerns of the professoriate.”

A beneficial link may exist between teaching and research (e.g., Stahl, 1991), yet most agree that in academe little credit is given to good teaching. The 1985 report from the Association of American Colleges (AAC) recognized that professors “speak of teaching loads and research opportunities, never the reverse.” The 1990 Carnegie report recognized the imbalance in research and teaching and suggested, “Many potentially competent teachers do a conspicuously bad job in the classroom because they know that bad teaching is not penalized in any formal way” (Boyer, 1991). Bok (1992) declares that “…in the modern university the incentives are not weighted in favor of teaching and education—indeed, quite the contrary is true.” He says the bargaining chip for an outstanding professor is always reduced teaching loads and never reduced research loads.

In 1991, Syracuse University reported on the Lilly Survey conducted to determine the beliefs of faculties and administrators at 47 U.S. universities on the relative importance of research and undergraduate teaching (Gray et al., 1991). The data showed that both faculty and administrators at those universities believe a balance should be maintained between research and undergraduate teaching, but that their universities are moving toward more emphasis on research. Deans and academic unit (department) heads declared that they balance the importance of teaching and research, but, in contrast, the faculty at these institutions perceived that deans and department heads place more importance on research. At the University of Arkansas, questions on the Lilly Survey were answered in very much the same way as at all other universities. All responding groups endorsed a balance between research and teaching, but faculty, and not department heads or deans, perceived that those administrators place more importance on research. This discrepancy between perceptions of faculty and

Abbreviations: AAC, Association of American Colleges.

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administration can contribute to frustrations about what responsibilities a faculty member should assume. Such frustration can affect teaching.

PERCEPTION OF TEACHING

The AAC Report (1985) declares that “The enemy of good teaching is not research, but rather the spirit that says that research is the only worthy or legitimate task for faculty members.” This spirit, or perception, may be engendered by “the graduate school model, with its single-minded focus on the preparation for research.” Boyer (1991) urges that training for teaching be incorporated in all graduate programs. He believes that even graduate students are given the impression that it is more prestigious to be a research assistant than a teaching assistant. Bok (1992) also illustrates that little attention is given to whether the beginning teacher is ready to teach. Perhaps this lack of training provides the basis for his assertion that teaching does not improve from one generation to the next.

The spirit that relegates teaching to subordinate levels may also come from the teacher’s attitude that the job is routine or is performed in isolation. Boyer (1991) says that “teaching is often viewed as a routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do.” To counter, he sees teaching as a dynamic endeavor and suggests that, “inspired teaching keeps the flame of scholarship alive” by transforming knowledge to students. Hipple (1989) also describes faculty perception of teaching as routine and proposes that faculty need to be enlivened with creative projects and interaction with other teachers.

In spite of their strong influence on attitudes toward teaching and, in turn, on our students’ learning, perceptions vacillate in and among individuals. The perceptions about teaching-related issues as described in the literature appear to be common throughout most universities, but we wanted to assess the perceptions of our own college faculty. Our objective was to assess the perception of teachers in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics on a variety of teaching-related issues and their ideas for changes in curriculum and teaching techniques.

THE SURVEYS

Our opportunity to survey the teaching faculty arose in May 1992 when a teaching retreat was held for the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at the University of Arkansas, a land-grant institution. In the college, numerous changes had taken place in curriculum, and teachers expressed a desire to hold the retreat to discuss teaching issues and techniques. We surveyed the 70 participants at the meetings, 28 of whom were professors, 15 associate professors, and 16 assistant professors. The remaining 11 had titles of dean, department head, and teaching assistant. Of those who listed teaching as a part of their job assignments, the official times assigned to teaching ranged from 5 to 100%.

We conducted one survey as the 70 participants arrived at the retreat and received a 100% response. A second questionnaire was presented the next day at the end of the workshop, and we received an 84% return. One year later in May 1993, we sent questionnaires to the same people who had attended the retreat and received a 63% return.

The questionnaires were anonymously returned to us, but in addition to opinions on teaching issues, all three surveys contained questions that would determine demographics of respondents along with the extent of their involvement in teaching. Some of the questions on the first survey in 1992 were the same as those on the second as well as on the survey conducted in 1993. We wanted to determine whether the retreat itself changed the respondents’ perceptions about teaching and whether their perceptions were different 1 yr after the teaching retreat. To assess opinions, we presented a list of statements that responders rated as relatively true or false, and we also provided space for individual comments. Opinion statements on the questionnaires were rated on a scale of 4 to 1, with 4 = very true and 1 = very false. We considered 2.5 a neutral response. Simple statistics were used, providing frequency distributions and chi-square analysis of responses to each question (SAS Inst., 1989).

RESULTS

Demographics

Each department in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics was represented at the retreat by at least one individual. With the exception of Home Economics, no department had more than one female representative, and Agronomy and Home Economics had the most participants with 12 each. Across departments, participants declared a range of from 3 to 250 in the number of students they teach per year. The one with three students per year had a 5% teaching appointment, and the one with 250 had a 60% teaching appointment. Six participants had 100% teaching assignments and taught 30 to 200 students per year.

The AAC Report (1985) contends that “only in higher education is it generally assumed that teachers need no preparation, no supervision, no introduction to teaching... If the professional preparation of doctors were as minimal as that of college teachers, the United States would have as many funeral directors as lawyers.” In our study, on the issue of preparation for teaching, 29% of the participants had no experience or instruction in teaching before they taught their first college class. Fifty-seven percent of them had worked as teaching assistants, 34% had taken education courses, 19% had attended teaching training sessions, and 14% were certified teachers when they accepted a position with a college faculty. These percentages may reflect more training than would be expected for most disciplines in agriculture because 19 of the 70 participants were from the departments of Agriculture and Extension Education and Home Economics where training in education is often a part of graduate work. Bowman et al. (1986) surveyed 250 agronomy teachers at land-grant universities and reported that 66% of them had no formal training for teaching.

In our study, 40 participants had no advisor or mentor to assist in their first teaching efforts, and of the 30 who did, 12 advisors were formally appointed. Boyer
(1991) and others advocate mentoring for beginning teachers or teaching assistants. The AAC Report (1985) also encourages mentoring as well as continual evaluation and interaction among teaching colleagues. On a regular basis, 40 of the 70 respondents in our study talk with colleagues at least once a week about teaching, 21 do so at least once a month, and 9 rarely talk with colleagues about teaching.

On the question about whether they read the literature on teaching, 69% answered yes, and the publications most often named were The Chronicle of Higher Education with 24 readers, and the NACTA Journal with 18. Participants also named journals associated with their own disciplines such as the Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (formerly JAE), the Journal of Home Economics, and the Journal of Agricultural Education.

**Faculty Opinions**

On both the 1992 and 1993 surveys, opinions on particular statements that were repeated from one survey to another generally remained the same. The only significant difference was with three statements that asserted that (i) the department head, (ii) other administrators, and (iii) faculty in the department are “dedicated to teaching.” The day after the teaching retreat compared with the day before the retreat, responders perceived that “other” administrators were more dedicated to teaching (Table 1). One year later, the perception of dedication of “other” administrators had declined again. The dedication of administrators to teaching was perceived to be lower than that of department heads and faculty on all three surveys. The higher rating the day after the retreat may reflect the fact that the Dean and Director of the College, the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the Vice-President for Agriculture, and the Chancellor of the University served on a panel at the retreat and strongly voiced support for teaching.

With no other statistically significant differences among questionnaire responses, all other ratings discussed here are averages of the replies on the surveys on which a statement was rated. On all three surveys, respondents agreed with reports in the literature that good teachers do not receive adequate recognition and compensation for good teaching (Table 2a). The statement that teaching is the primary mission of a university rated higher than the corresponding one that research is the primary mission. This point differs from the suggestion by Elrick (1990) that even those who don’t do research believe that they spend more time on teaching activities than they are credited with.

Faculty were somewhat negative (2.2) about the adequacy of their training for teaching (Table 2a). Our survey showed that the respondents like teaching, but do not publish much in teaching or education journals. Weaver (1986) concluded from his study that writing about teaching is “definitely not encouraged.” His information was derived from a survey of 274, 4-yr colleges and universities.

**Table 1. Perceptions on whether faculty, department heads, and other administrators are dedicated to teaching.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey†</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Department heads</th>
<th>Other administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991-1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.5b*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.8a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.4b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Means in a column followed by a different letter are significantly different at the 5% level.
† Survey 1991-1 was conducted just before a teaching retreat. Survey 1992-2 was just after that retreat, and 1993 was with the same responders 1 yr later.
‡ Based on a rating scale of 4 = very true and 1 = very false.

Faculty spend an average of 9.3% of their time advising graduate students and 7.3% advising undergraduates. Calculated from a 40-h week, that total percentage would be 6.64 h. Respondents were rather negative (2.1) in their perception that administrators view advising as important, and even more negative (1.7) on whether teachers are rewarded materially for undergraduate advising (Table 2a). These perceptions could certainly influence the time or advice given to students. Responses were rather neutral about whether faculty are given enough time to do a good job of teaching (2.7) and to read literature on teaching (2.4).

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**Table 2. Mean ratings on statements revealing teachers’ perceptions of teaching, curriculum, and students.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviated statement†</th>
<th>Mean score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers don’t get enough recognition/compensation (1,2,3)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The major mission of a university is teaching (1)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The major mission of a university is research (1)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration views academic advising as important (3)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am materially rewarded for advising undergraduates (3)</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My job doesn’t provide time enough to teach well (1,3)</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have time to read about teaching (1,3)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My training as a teacher is inadequate (1,2)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t really enjoy teaching (1,3)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sometimes publish in teaching journals, (1,3)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Students and curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students lack preparation for college (1,3)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My students are not dedicated to academics (1,3)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student cheating is poorly defined and monitored (1,2,3)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We adequately prepare students for careers (2,3)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need to change our teaching techniques (2,3)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students need more than just business/industry skills (2)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I should teach communication skills in my class (2,3)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture is the best method for my class (2,3)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Numbers in parenthesis indicate which survey contained the statement. 1 = first survey of 1992; 2 = second survey of 1992; and 3 = survey of 1993.
‡ Scores are means of ratings on all surveys. Statements were scored on a scale of 4 to 1, with 4 meaning very true and 1 meaning very false.
Responses indicated that faculty are concerned about their students and the curriculum. They perceive that students are not well-prepared for college class work (3.1), but were neutral (2.5) about students' dedication to academics (Table 2b). They also were neutral about whether cheating among students is poorly defined and monitored. Respondents perceive that we adequately prepare students for their careers (3.0), but we still need to make changes in curriculum and teaching techniques. Emphasis was given to the needs of our students for more communication skills, and respondents were most positive about the statement that education must involve more than just skills for business or industry. Relative to changing teaching techniques, the response was almost neutral (2.3) to the statement that lecturing is not always the best method. Recently, a great deal of literature has advocated the adoption of classroom techniques that involve critical thinking and problem solving or collaborative learning (e.g., Johnson et al., 1990) and writing-to-learn exercises (e.g., Parrish et al., 1985). Even Murray and Murray (1992), who discuss methods for using the lecture technique, also recommend the use of student participation and short writing exercises along with the lecture.

OBSERVATIONS

Perhaps such activities as teaching retreats or workshops are important to stimulating good teaching and to maintaining our interests in teaching. Hippie (1989) speaks of "thickening and enlarging" a faculty to enliven it. He gives the example of a monthly luncheon meeting at the University of Tennessee where teachers from various disciplines share time and ideas. The retreat where we ask for responses on the first two surveys was, among other things, an effort to provide an atmosphere of camaraderie and to introduce new teaching ideas (Davis and Beyrouty, 1993). Most participants believed the event was valuable, and in answer to the question on whether we should hold another retreat, the response was a unanimous yes. In 1993 we asked again if the retreat the past year had been valuable and again received a positive reply. Of those who attended, 54% said they had incorporated ideas obtained at the retreat into their teaching the following year.

Evidence points to the idea that continual revitalization is essential to good teaching. In fact, the literature also suggests that the role of teaching is no less respected today than it was 40 or even 80 yr ago. Bok (1992) believes conditions in education today are not worse than they were in 1971 or 1951. He goes on to say that universities did not pay enough attention to the quality of education a priority second to none."

Such a perception of ourselves can be paramount to the continual revitalization of teaching and learning. Revitalization must not be unrealistic optimism that remains relatively unchanged for 80 yr. It must be real luncheons, teaching retreats, true mentoring situations, and peer reviews of teaching. It must be respect and recognition for publications in education journals, for advising students, and for innovative teaching techniques in the classroom where routines must sometimes be carried out in teaching basic skills and facts. Our study indicates that faculty benefit professionally and personally from retreats and recognition within the academic community.

Results of our survey correspond well with findings in the literature about opinions of college faculties. Our teachers not only enjoy teaching, but view it as a primary mission of a university. They spend more time with teaching and advising activities than they perceive that they are credited with. Their interest in students and curriculum and the enjoyment of teaching indicate that the spirit or perception of our faculty toward teaching is positive in spite of working in an environment where teaching is not necessarily considered to be as important as research.

REFERENCES

Hipple, T. 1989. To enliven the faculty, try thickening and enlarging. College Teaching 37:82.


