Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Work that Matters Should Be Work that Counts

Authors: Mary Taylor Huber, Senior Scholar, and Rebecca Cox, Research Assistant
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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Abstract: A commentary on one of the most vexing issues facing education at all levels—incentive systems that impede serious scholarly work on teaching and learning.

Essay:

The hallmark of academic freedom is the opportunity it affords faculty members to pursue innovative or unconventional scholarship. But what happens when innovative scholarship is hard to judge by the standard metrics of faculty evaluation?

Consider the scholarship of teaching and learning. Over the past decade or so, inquiry into college teaching has become more than just a specialist's concern. Across the country, teaching initiatives in higher education are gaining visibility, innovation is on the upswing, and mainstream faculty are consulting the pedagogical literature, looking critically at education in their subjects, researching the ins and outs of student learning in their classrooms, and using what they are discovering to improve their teaching. Many are also making this work public in order to benefit from peer review and contribute to understanding and better practice in the teaching and learning of their fields.

Yet these extraordinary efforts are not always rewarded when it is time for a tenure, promotion, or merit review. In part, this is because using the scholarship of teaching and learning for purposes of academic advancement is so new. But the pioneers are also finding that the "standard metrics"—despite their apparent objectivity—can make unfamiliar kinds of scholarship look substandard instead. The conferences and journals in which they present their work may not be well known to departmental colleagues. The funding may be less generous; the external reviewers less prestigious; the methods might seem soft. Pedagogical and curricular reform projects are often highly collaborative, aimed at improving practice. They may also draw on literature from other fields, and

involve unusual products, like course portfolios or new media materials. Perhaps most troubling is the fact that successful teaching innovations often circulate without the innovator's name attached—making it har! d to trace and lay claim to the impact of one's work.

This is not just another case of the teaching versus research debate. Faculty who bring their disciplinary expertise to community development have also had white-knuckle experiences gaining academic recognition for their work. And in many fields, research itself is changing to include more multidisciplinary, collaborative work oriented to solving real-world problems, and resistant to the standard evaluative practices of academe. Clearly, this is all work that matters, and there is a lot at stake in finding ways to ensure that it is work that counts.

For the past few years, we have been studying the careers of four research university faculty who have achieved national prominence in the scholarship of teaching and learning in their fields. Each was warned by caring and responsible mentors that they were taking risks in treating teaching so seriously. But they persisted, were tenured and promoted to associate professor, and so far two have further advanced to full professor. And their stories now circulate in their scholarly communities as signs that the scholarship of teaching and learning can be woven successfully into an academic career. That is the good news.

The bad news is what their experiences reveal about the faculty evaluation strategies commonly used in American universities. Scholarship may be changing, but evaluation continues to reward most readily work that conforms to older norms. Many campuses have changed their guidelines to encourage innovation, but whether this new work will really count is a question that is now being answered case by case. People still tell discouraging stories about faculty who take the risk and find their careers derailed. But there is much to learn from the growing number of scholars who succeed.

These more hopeful stories underline how important it is for faculty who take up new kinds of scholarship to be strong advocates for what it is they're doing and explain in every way possible why it is both intellectually and professionally serious. But the primary responsibility should not be borne by the most vulnerable. So the second lesson concerns the responsibility of senior faculty and academic administrators who believe in the work's value to support it as mentors, interlocutors, external reviewers, and recommenders. There is also ample need for lobbying, policy reform, and debate about standards that might strengthen the communities in disciplines and on campus that understand, value, and reward such work.

The scholars we have worked with in our study, and many many more, are helping to make teaching and learning in higher education an area that advances through discussion and demonstration. They are showing that faculty who are trained and committed to the standard subject matter and methods of their fields and disciplines can use those same habits of mind to become informed and inquiring college teachers. They are showing that their students are benefiting from such work. And they are showing through the ups and

downs of their own academic lives that it is possible to make the scholarship of teaching and learning a vital and viable part of an academic career.

With good policy, good work, and good will, it appears, colleagues who care can make faculty evaluation systems flexible enough to "see" and fairly judge such unconventional kinds of scholarly work.

51 Vista Lane
Stanford, CA 94305
http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/