
Building a Sense of Permanence into Teaching and Assessment Improvement Efforts

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Improvement: Project 5.3

Teaching, learning, and assessment

Question: How have institutions responded to calls for improvement?

- Context: Prevailing views and criticisms
 - Undergraduate education is in a state of decline
 - Faculty are unwilling to improve teaching
 - Increased emphasis on student assessment will lead to improvements in teaching and learning

Case Study Methods...

- Urban University, Landgrant University, National University (all Research I)
- English, mathematics, and chemistry departments
- Interviews with four faculty in each department
- Review of tenure and assessment documentation
- Observation of on-campus events (lectures, meetings)

Conceptual framework used to guide the research

- Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977)
 - Learning dependent on a blend of influences and internal processes
 - The more proximate the influences, the stronger the impact
- Scholarship of Teaching (Boyer, 1990)
 - Teaching
 - Discovery
 - Integration
 - Application

Proximate influences

- Rewards have proximity to one's pocketbook and to one's position within the institution
- Faculty career structures - pressures and norms influence faculty decision-making over time, often across career stages
- Assessment of teaching - the methods used by faculty to assess their teaching, or the teaching of their peers

What is permanence?

In terms of faculty perceptions, permanence includes:

- A sense that an institutional focus on teaching will be long-lasting
- A sense that consideration of teaching is integrated into the reward system
- A sense that teaching support structures are not ad hoc, but rather a part of the institutional structure
- A sense that faculty are providing the leadership for the creation and maintenance of new standards

Interview Findings ...

Superficial changes

“It used to be if you were just a good researcher, you could get your tenure instead of saying well, if you're a good teacher you can get your tenure, now it's well, you have to do both well, but there hasn't been any reevaluation of what teaching means or what research means.”

- Landgrant University, English, Assistant Professor

Skepticism prevents long term change

“My feeling is that the college and the provosts have demanded evidence for teaching excellence as part of their promotion packages, but they haven't changed anything else. They continue to demand excellence in everything else, and the simple fact of the matter is there aren't enough hours in a day for anybody to be truly outstanding in everything that they do.”

-National University, Chemistry, Professor

Acknowledging scholarly traditions

“No rules were changed [in my tenure case]. The question is, does what I do require a Ph.D. in chemistry and can the college use the same set of rules to judge scholarly activity in chemistry, history, English, psychology, and anthropology already. Can those thoughts be translated into scholarship and what I call discipline-centered pedagogy? The answer is apparently yes. Do you get grants for it? Yeah. Do you write papers for it? Yeah. Are they peer reviewed? You bet. Do you get invited to give talks? Yeah. Do people know you? Sure. I'm happy that we did it that way. I don't like changing rules when you don't have to.”

-National University, Chemistry, Associate Professor

Thinking about the fundamental role

“I think there's been a lot of discussion about the changing definitions of scholarship, and we have had many, many discussions about the scholarship of teaching and what that means and how you would know excellence in teaching scholarship when you saw it, and that's really changed a lot. But I don't think we're quite at the point of seeing it being applied because the promotion committees are still composed of people who still are skeptical about that.”

-Urban University, Chemistry, Professor

Important themes identified from case study research

- Characteristics of institutions that effectively support teaching and assessment efforts...
 - Faculty develop a sense of empowerment
 - Faculty and administrators maintain positive working relationships
 - Decision-making is decentralized

Discussion

- If faculty perceive institutional efforts to improve teaching and assessment are temporary...
 - It can erode the sense of empowerment among faculty
 - It can create strained relationships between faculty and administrators
 - It can contribute to the feeling that one's unit is not integrated into the university effort
- Consequently, faculty may decide it is not worthwhile to change their teaching simply to satisfy others.

Implications for research

- The link between faculty motivation and institutional rewards should be studied in connection with research on faculty culture
- Criticisms of teaching aimed at research faculty should not be taken seriously without input from those attempting to maintain balanced workloads in the research university setting

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