

## ADDRESSING TEACHING AT NOTRE DAME\*

Some thoughts and suggestions for faculty and departments from  
The Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning, August 2003.

It goes without saying that Teaching is a core mission and central responsibility of the University of Notre Dame. The teaching of our faculty needs to be of the highest possible quality in terms of its substance, effectiveness, and the learning of our students, and it must be evaluated thoroughly and carefully, especially in the context of tenure, promotion, and compensation.

In his 2003 Strategic Planning Document, President Malloy articulates this priority as follows:

*In the hiring process and in promotion, only those faculty for whom superior teaching is a high priority should be welcomed into or sustained in this community of learning.*

In order to be confident that the teaching of our faculty is of the highest quality it needs to be evaluated. This should occur in two separate realms: Within an effective departmental mentoring structure that encourages faculty members to reflect about their courses and their teaching and provides them with opportunities to improve their craft, and independently, within a careful process of evaluation by the relevant administrative units of the university. The dual goal is to insure a high standard of teaching quality throughout the university as well as a high degree of accuracy and fairness when a particular faculty member is assessed.

The student response to the questions of the Teacher Course Evaluation form has been a primary instrument at Notre Dame with which a faculty member's teaching is evaluated both at the departmental level and beyond. The TCEs are an important measure, to be sure – classroom discourse ultimately needs to connect – but they provide only a limited perspective on the teaching substance of a faculty member. It is important, especially in reference to the mandated evaluations, that at the points of renewal and promotion to tenure, that TCE information be embedded in a more comprehensive evaluative approach.

It is the purpose of these pages to provide suggestions to the faculty and the departments within the circle of issues raised above. They come in the form of reflections and practices from Notre Dame's faculty, the Departments, and the Kaneb Center.

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\* All evidence suggests that the teaching at Notre Dame is very good overall. On the other hand, teaching should never be in a state of "having arrived," rather it should be a subject of continued reflection and exploration. This is the spirit in which the pages that follow should be taken.

# 1. Some Suggestions for the Faculty: Belaboring the Obvious?

## A. Gearing up for a Course

- If you are teaching a course for the first time (or if haven't done it in a while), seek out a colleague or two who have taught it recently. Have discussions about the syllabus, goals, students, texts, approaches, strategies, and other aspects of the course. Consider following a tried and tested approach and be cautious about experimenting. Originality is essential when it comes to research; when it comes to teaching "lift" all the good ideas you can.
- A newly developed course often requires several iterations before both content and teaching strategies are in tune with the targeted student audience. Consider teaching a course several times in succession. Doing so will provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate improvement (content and strategies) within the same environment.
- Study the Teacher Course Evaluation (TCE) form and its three components: Preparation, organization, presentation; stimulate thinking, care about learning; helpfulness and availability; consonance of examinations with central goals. Reflect about these concerns in the context of your course. Engage some of the stellar teachers in your department in conversations about these matters. Reflect about the course. What should the chief messages be and how are they best transmitted?
- Your choice of classroom strategies should depend on many factors: the discipline, whether the course is introductory or advanced, the number of students, etc., etc. The "lecture with an occasional student question" mode for the full duration of the period may not be the best way to connect your subject and your students. They (perhaps unlike you) belong to the "gameboy" generation. Consider changing tempo and "mixing it up." For example, you might use a combination of approaches: lecture, student presentations, "seminar type" sequences, and students working in groups and reporting their insights.
- Technology can add compelling elements to your course. An occasional PowerPoint lecture to convey the "sights and sounds" of a topic: depictions of old manuscripts, new imagery, and illuminating animations can add a powerful dimension. A few PowerPoint "slides" to organize the flow of a presentation might be helpful. As in any delicate realm, care is required. PowerPoint as vehicle of delivery of a steady stream of facts can be deadly. Technologies such as WebCT can be very useful in structuring the "after hours" of your course.

## B. At the Start

- Give a robust overview of the course and include a skeleton of its major themes. Articulate its goals and make a case for its relevance. The brief exploration of one of these themes will give you an important “first day” opportunity to convey a sense of excitement to the students about your academic agenda. Be explicit with your students as to their responsibilities and your expectations vis-à-vis assignments, examinations, and the determination of their grades.
- If there is one message that you should get across to your students from the beginning and persistently thereafter it is: “I care about your learning.” Begin this leitmotif by asking your students (possibly with written responses) about their academic background as it relates to the subject matter of your course (and begin to learn their names).
- One of the reasons why Notre Dame students have been successful is that they have the ability to understand a system or environment and learn how to respond to it. Consequently, they like an organized “up front” approach. They do not like uncertainties or surprises.

## C. Connecting in the Classroom

- Be explicit and consistent about aligning your examinations and assignments to the course goals and student learning objectives that you articulated. Make yourself available outside class.
- Pay close attention to the expressions on your students’ faces and learn to read them. If you have a sea of blank stares in front of you, stop, back up, retool, and try to reconnect. There will an occasion when your message will not connect at all; in such a situation you might call time out, ask the students what they want to talk about, change the topic completely, and you might convert a lackluster hour into something terrific.
- Invite feedback from your students at least once during the semester. Doing so early enough will allow you to adjust. A non-intrusive way to do so is to inform your students by e-mail that you have asked the Kaneb Center to send them a set of questions about the course, that they should reply to the Center, that these replies will be kept confidential, and that only the aggregate result will be provided to you. Alternatively, you could ask a colleague to take over a class and explore with the students ...
- Keep alongside your record of course materials a running commentary with your reflections about what was effective, what did not connect well, what needs modifying, etc.

- Perhaps “introduce” the TCEs at the semester’s end by pointing out that this is an important measure with which the university evaluates teaching, that you are always interested in improving, and that you would be grateful for constructive and insightful critique. You might ask your students to reflect about the course for a few minutes before they begin to attack the forms. When you get your results back (and your displeasure wears off ... you’ll be admonished for going both “too fast” and “too slow” ... for belaboring the obvious and assuming too much ... for being personable as well as aloof) reflect about the numbers and the comments, and ask yourself whether - just possibly - this or that point might have validity. Pay particular attention to issues that arise with some frequency. The TCEs, while surely a limited perspective, do give you information about one very important issue: How well are you connecting your stuff to the students?

## 2. Departments

### A. Supportive Culture

- One critical question that should be asked at the time of the candidate’s campus visit (the primary purpose of which is to measure intellectual substance): is she able to tell us articulately and compellingly (at the colloquium or at lunch) what she is about as scholar? Lack of transparency portends a lack of transparency in the classroom later.
- Careful thought should be given how best to introduce an incoming faculty member into the departmental teaching scheme. Surely the most “friendly” assignments are upper division or graduate courses with subject related to the faculty member’s scholarship. Some faculty members need to gain a sense of the culture before taking on the challenge of making an engaging and elementary case for a subject far removed from the students’ academic agendas or interests.
- The Department of Romance Languages and Literatures has a yearly workshop for its junior faculty that discusses renewal , tenure, and promotion procedures and expectations, as well as grant opportunities. In the Department of Biology the chair does this with annual “fireside” chats.
- Nurture a mentoring environment within the department to help new faculty members and teaching assistants adjust to the department's teaching culture and practice, and support faculty members who need to improve. Facilitate - and perhaps formalize - interactions between them and the stellar teachers in your department. These might begin with discussions of syllabi and learning goals of a course, continue with a number of reciprocal classroom visitations (especially early in the semester), and lead to ongoing conversations and reflections about relevant pedagogical matters. A number of departments have such schemes in place.
- The Language departments and the Departments of Philosophy and Electrical Engineering have energized programs for their TAs.

## B. The Learning of our Students

- The bottom line is the learning of our students and a sense of confidence that it occurs in an exemplary way. This involves everything from curriculum to opportunities beyond the classroom. The Department of Psychology undertook in 2001/02 a very comprehensive review of its entire undergraduate curriculum and mission. The content, goals, expectations, teaching strategies, and the quality of examinations of every course were analyzed. Surveys of graduating seniors were elicited and an agenda for improvement was articulated. Within the past year the Department of Art, Art History & Design undertook a careful assessment of its curriculum. The Department of Chemistry has started a revision of its curriculum by inviting representatives of “top ranked, best practice departments” for a workshop.
- The Department of Anthropology offers academic internship opportunities, e.g., at the Smithsonian. The Departments of Marketing, Art, Art History & Design and Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering have created a linked sequence “from concept to purchase.” The Departments of English and Political Science have a linked sequence as well. Many departments provide research experiences for their students. Over 50% of the majors in the Departments of Biology and Chemistry engage research. A number of departments – those in Engineering deserve mention - require robust capstone projects that are carefully designed draw on the full range of the students’ academic training. The Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering assesses the learning of its students by gathering the instructors of the entire course sequence around a table for a retrospective “what they didn’t know” analysis. A number of departments (probably not enough) have honors tracks within their major with goal the preparation of those students who intend to pursue advanced degrees. The Mathematics Department includes a graduate style seminar within its honors track. The Department of Physics has a senior seminar that requires each student to make two presentations, write a research paper, and gives information about careers in physics.
- The Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering is considering a web based approach to advising its students. The advisee keeps an evolving journal of academic goals and progress, writes about plans to pursue advanced degrees or professional careers. These are reviewed with a departmental advisor. They are to have a strategic aspect and are intended to get students to take charge of their academic and professional agendas.
- The recently established basic engineering courses Eng 111 and Eng 112 are designed to give first year students an elementary but meaningful overview of the field of engineering. Other disciplines might explore such an approach for courses that satisfy university requirements.

## C. Assessing Teaching

- The Department of Management tracks the teaching of its untenured faculty as follows: Every untenured faculty member is evaluated annually. This includes the assessment of teaching. All components of the TCEs are considered; informal student input is solicited; how well elective courses draw is looked at; syllabi are collected and their evolution is reviewed; delivery and contents of the courses are considered. The chair's written summary of the teaching performance is made available to the CAP with a request to provide feedback. This summary and the feedback become the subject of a faculty member's annual conversation with the chair. This results in recommendations to the faculty member; if deemed necessary a senior mentor is assigned. In the following year, the faculty member's response to the recommendations for improvement is assessed. This yearly cycle is more comprehensive during the renewal and tenure years. The Departments of Finance, History, and Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering follow similar approaches.
- The Marketing Department has an annual round of student focus groups, conducted by the chair, which explore the teaching of faculty in specific courses. All junior faculty members are included each year. There is prompt feedback to the faculty member. The chair of the Department of Chemistry conducts a "no holds barred" focus group with graduating seniors that also explores the teaching of the department's faculty.
- The Department of Romance Languages and Literatures has a thorough set of guidelines that faculty peers use in their classroom visitations of junior faculty. The Department of Psychology solicits written assessments from a sample of former undergraduates and all graduate students of a candidate for renewal or promotion. The indication is that 80% of the students respond.
- The Department of English uses the following criteria to evaluate the teaching of candidates for renewal and tenure:
  - \* the range of courses, in terms of level and content, taught by the candidate
  - \* the definition of the goals of the course and how well and in what way the design of the course, as manifested by the syllabus, assignments and so on, corresponds to these goals
  - \* the successful integration of research with teaching
  - \* the teaching of skills appropriate and necessary for the course
  - \* success in challenging students to learn new ways of thinking
  - \* the organization of class meetings (e. g. are the goals and the theme of the class stated at the beginning? is there a summation at the end? and so forth)
  - \* clarity of communication in lecture, discussion, and response to questions
  - \* the handling of difficult questions/situations

- \* the quality of class discussion
  - \* the involvement of significant number of students in class discussion
  - \* the quality of the structure, organization, and delivery of lectures
  - \* the quality of other class activities (e. g. small-group discussions).
- The teaching reports in departmental renewal, tenure, and promotion packets presented to the PAC rely too often only on a combination of TCE “number theory” and comments from a few class room visitations by faculty peers. This limited perspective assigns (by default) a disproportionately important role to the TCEs. Not often enough do the departmental reports examine the substance of the course taught: quality of the combined reality of syllabi, readings, assignments, examinations, student presentations, etc. The Department of Theology follows such practice robustly; the Departments of Classics Languages, English, and Management do so as well.
  - A Department that uses the evaluation regime similar to that of the Department of Management (see above) is in a position to provide an evolving picture rather than just the state-at-the-end in its evaluation of the teaching of a candidate at renewal or promotion. Care needs to be taken to keep a firewall between such evaluations and concurrent mentoring.
  - In addition to the standard combination of TCE analysis and classroom “snapshots” provided by peers, Departments might consider proceeding along the following lines, at least at the time of the tenure assessment. The subset of the departmental CAP charged with the responsibility of analyzing a candidate’s teaching should select recent courses taught by the candidate (e. g., three courses: one that is representative in terms of TCEs, class size and type of course, one in which the TCEs might have been problematic,...). For these, the designated CAP members should request syllabi, statements of course objectives, exams (possibly including the students’ final exams), assignments, reports of visitations by peers, TCE scores, feedback that the candidate might have received, etc. After they analyze this and the candidate’s own reflections about teaching on Form P, they have a conversation with the candidate about these courses (from special circumstances that might have existed, to issues ranging from the syllabi to the goals for the course, to evidence of student progress, to matters arising from Form P). Only after they have made their own visitations of current classes of the candidate, (perhaps) solicited the opinions of former students (including graduate students), and made some comparisons with versions of the same courses taught by others to get a sense of innovations or deficiencies, do the designated CAP members undertake their thorough and careful written analysis. Such a report would put the TCEs into a broad and credible framework.

### 3. The Kaneb Center

It is the mission of the Kaneb Center to

- stimulate reflection about teaching and learning,
- emphasize that an effective teaching and learning environment is not only a locus where relevant facts and concepts are presented but also an interactive forum that allows students to develop a mindset of informed and critical assessment and an ability to communicate knowledgeably and articulately,
- sponsor a program of workshops, presentations, and consultations that highlight the best teaching practices and learning environments and encourage and assist the efforts of Notre Dame's faculty and teaching assistants to nurture and sustain these.
- be an advocate for the enhancement of practices and structures related to the university's teaching mission.

Any faculty member is invited to stop by at the Kaneb Center, 353 DeBartolo Hall, or for a virtual visit at <http://www.nd.edu/~kaneb/>