STANDARDS AND COLLEGIALITY

Some Lessons from Normal State University

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At Normal State University, an administrative hierarchy tries to ensure some standards for the quality of courses. Proposed new courses must be approved by a committee, which judges that the instructor is qualified to give the course and that its content will be appropriate. The department chairman checks on the course and tries to ensure that it's being taught competently. We all know that there are some pretty bad courses, and poor professors, at Normal State, but the system probably stops or eliminates some egregiously bad courses.

None of us, I think, would want to have such a system at Evergreen. Instead, we let anyone teach any program, as long as it fits curricular needs and can be accommodated by needs for faculty. The Deans, acting somewhat like department chairmen, try to review colleague and student evaluations to ensure competent teaching and high-quality programs. Yet we all know that the system isn't working well. Students leave programs for various reasons, but too often it is because the program is poorly organized or poorly taught, because the program work is boringly simple or maddeningly demanding. The Deans simply can't know everything that's happening in a program. By the time program evaluations are written--if they are--the program is over, probably never to be repeated, and the Deans may never see the evaluations anyway. Yet we all have a stake in ensuring that Evergreen programs are of the highest quality.

I suggest several changes we must make in our programs, with some special attention to Core Programs, which appear to have more problems than others.

1. Bring back real collegial development.- Even though we try (at least nominally) to hire excellent teachers, everyone has more to learn about teaching and about organizing programs, especially newer, younger folks. We need to insist on a faculty hiring and retention policy that puts development back into the collegial evaluation process and encourages people, again, to work with one another honestly and openly to improve everyone's ability to teach. Let's work for a time when, as during the first few years of the College, we can have faculty discussions about teaching and education, rather than about a zillion administrative and governance matters. I suggest that we suffer from a lack of discussions about standards and quality, about the amount of work, and quality of work, that students should be expected to do, so faculty members now have only vague ideas about what they should expect of their students and what their students should expect of them. If some students are badly overworked and others badly underworked, if some programs are so poorly organized that students flee from them, it is in large part because we haven't had the time to discuss these issues. We need time to do this.

2. Take some of the burdens of expectation off Core Programs.- Somehow we have decided that Core Programs should perform general socializing and prerequisite functions for the rest of the College. In addition to helping students adjust generally to life at Evergreen, we've expected them to teach incoming students to participate effectively in seminars, to read critically, and to write clear, well-organized papers. Well, in the first place, they can't do all this. And, even if

they could do it, they wouldn't help the College very much because relatively few students begin with Core and then go through three more years of work. So let's recognize that all programs must work on seminaring, reading, and writing, and let's be sure that they are all designed to do so, no matter what their nominal level is. Many students in my nominally advanced program last year (Meaning, Learning and Power) had been in Core Programs, but we still had to work hard on these academic skills all year.

3. Insist that Core faculty members be serious about teaching reading and writing.- At the same time, let's not lose sight of the fact that Core Programs share this responsibility for teaching basic skills, and let's be sure that people teaching Core are serious about critical reading and excellent writing. Last year, I worked with one young woman who was a terrible writer. When I asked her what she had done the year before, she said she had been in two Core Programs, and that neither one had worked much on writing. I was appalled. When I asked Tom Maddox about the situation, he said that, indeed, there is a recent tendency for Core Programs to be taught by people who don't care much about the power of the English language and who don't think it's very important to work on critical reading and writing. (My interpretation of his words; he might state this differently.) I'm dismayed by the idea that we might hire people who don't care about excellent writing, but if we have such people, let's at least keep them out of Core Programs.

4. Put the best and most experienced teachers into Core.- At Normal State, there is a rule of thumb about assigning teachers. Assistant Professors, just out of grad school and post-docs, are normally assigned to the more advanced, specialized courses, on the assumption that they should be best at teaching the limited, special topics on which they have been concentrating for several years; furthermore, students in these courses should be more motivated to study the topics they have chosen, so lack of skill on the instructor's part will not be so important. Assuming that the university cares much about teaching, it assigns its older, more experienced professors to the introductory courses, on the assumption that they have a broader perspective to convey to students and that they are more skilled teachers, better suited for younger students who are not so skilled and motivated.

At Evergreen, we have somehow adopted rules that accomplish the opposite. We try to put new faculty members into Core right away. This may not always be a mistake, but as a general policy I think it is wrong. In general, we should try to let new faculty members teach more specialized programs. Then, as the Deans see that they're doing well, they should be encouraged to get into more basic, more interdisciplinary programs--always, of course, being sure that they are working with more experienced colleagues who can show them the ropes.

5. Everyone doesn't have to teach Core.- You'll notice that some of the above recommendations contradict the policy that everyone must teach in Core periodically. I think that's a dumb policy. We should expect everyone to teach in interdisciplinary programs, but unless we change our hiring policies radically, every faculty member is not going to have the abilities and motivation to do Core well. Them as don't do it well shouldn't do it at all.