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Honoring Exemplary Teaching in Research Universities

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Faculty surveys and interviews suggest that such elements as input from faculty, administrators, and students and the provision of varied awards for good teaching are important to the success of recognition programs at research universities.

Honoring Exemplary Teaching in Research Universities

Mary Deane Sorcinelli, Barbara Gross Davis

In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on institutions of higher education to both improve and reward teaching. Within the academy as well, faculty, chairs, deans, and academic leaders have raised questions about the balance of rewards between teaching and research, particularly at research universities (Bok, 1991; Gray, Froh, and Diamond, 1992).

As administrators, we have each worked, on opposite coasts, for nearly two decades to develop at research universities, institutions that traditionally support the primacy of research and publication, a culture that values teaching. And while it remains a familiar complaint that teaching is not rewarded at research universities, a number of initiatives are in place or being piloted that promise, in concert, to better honor exemplary teaching. In particular, our experience confirms the importance of the “fit” of an award program with an institution’s culture and context if teaching awards are to be a meaningful and significant part of the campus landscape.

In this chapter, we first discuss the most prevalent means of encouraging and rewarding excellence in teaching, namely, campuswide teaching awards. We outline key areas to consider in the development of such awards including the aspects of teaching honored, evidence on which selections are based, and processes for choosing those to be honored. Then we offer some suggestions from award recipients on how to improve the prizes. Finally we describe other incentives used at our and other large universities to honor and affirm teaching.

Nature of Teaching Awards

Teaching awards have been part of higher education for many years. For example, at the University of California, Berkeley, an institutional teaching award
was first given in 1959. A similar program was launched in 1962 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A recent study indicates that many colleges and universities have such awards, typically given to individuals on the basis of submitted materials documenting excellence in teaching (Miller, 1995). Usually an institution gives one to six awards annually, often with cash prizes, and recipients are typically honored at a public ceremony.

Criteria. What dimensions or characteristics of good teaching merit recognition? Other chapters in this volume address this question in greater depth. However, our belief is that teaching awards tend often reflect local guidelines and definitions of excellence. For example, at our universities, teaching and research are both essential duties of the faculty, and distinguished teaching awards acknowledge the efforts of faculty members who have successfully united these two roles. Lecturers are judged on their excellence in teaching and their contributions to the teaching mission of the university.

Specific criteria at University of California, Berkeley, include: command of the subject, continuous growth in the field of study, ability to organize course material and to present it cogently, effective design and redesign of courses, ability to inspire in students independent and original thinking, ability to encourage intellectual interests in beginning students and to stimulate creative work in advanced students, enthusiasm and vitality in learning and teaching, guidance of student research projects, participation in advising students, participation in guiding and supervising graduate student instructors (teaching assistants), and ability to respond to a diverse study body. At University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the criteria are similar and surveys of other research universities have found, in nearly all cases, the use of some combination of the aforementioned dimensions of teaching (Miller, 1995; Quinn, 1994).

Nomination and Review Process. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and many other campuses administer their award programs through a one-stage process: nominations are solicited by a certain date, the committee holds a series of meetings to review the submissions and makes its decisions. University of California, Berkeley, used to employ such a process but changed its procedures in 1992. The reasons for the change are instructive. By the late 1980s, the number of submissions for the award had grown to twenty to twenty-five (for three to five annual awards), and many excellent teachers and their departments felt great frustration about not being selected. In addition, the size of the dossiers and materials submitted (letters, evaluation data, teaching materials, statements from the nominee and from the nominating committee and department chair) placed a burden on the Academic Senate Committee on Teaching whose members devoted three to six hours to reviewing a single submission.

Under the new system, the award is a two-stage process. In stage one, departments initiate nominations by submitting a letter of no more than four single-spaced pages, from a department representative; a summary (qualitative, numerical, or both) of the nominee’s teaching evaluations for all courses taught during the last eight semesters of residence; and raw student evaluation data from any two courses offered by the nominee in the most recent four
semesters of residence. All three requisites can be filled without consulting the candidate, and these stage one nominations are made confidentially.

The Academic Senate Committee on Teaching reviews the stage one nominations and selects approximately ten submissions for further consideration. In stage two, the original submission is supplemented by the candidate's brief statement of his or her teaching philosophy; the candidate's curriculum vitae; no more than fifteen letters of support, including letters from campus colleagues, current students, and former students; raw student evaluation data from two additional courses in the four-semester period; and supporting materials (syllabi, tests, graded assignments, and so on) for any two of the four courses for which student evaluations are being submitted.

These changes have had the effect of minimizing the amount of work for departments, reducing the number of disappointed faculty, and decreasing the workload for the review committee.

How to Improve Teaching Award Programs

The following suggestions for improving teaching award programs are based on interviews with award-winning faculty at five research universities, including both of our campuses (Quinn, 1994), as well as surveys of faculty at other institutions (McNaught and Anwyl, 1992; Miller, 1995).

Clearly State and Widely Publicize the Selection Process. It is important that the awards be seen not as a display of in-group favoritism nor a cosmetic gesture nor an exercise in public relations. Thus, the campus should issue a clear statement of eligibility, criteria for teaching excellence, deadlines for nominations, and the nomination and selection procedures. It helps, too, to have a well-respected group make the awards; for example, an academic senate committee of senior faculty members with broad experience or a committee of former distinguished teaching award winners.

Make Peer, Administrator, and Especially Student Input an Important Part of the Process. As has been discussed in earlier chapters, the fullest picture of an individual's teaching emerges from a wide array of data. Information from students can be collected through end-of-course questionnaires, special surveys, letters, and interviews. Colleagues can evaluate course materials and observe classes to judge an instructor's mastery of course content, organization, and appropriate use of instructional materials. Instructors can be asked to submit a statement about their methods, goals, and accomplishments (Sorcinelli, 1986).

Provide More and Different Kinds of Recognition for Good Teaching. It is quite common for distinguished teachers to be honored in a public ceremony with both campus and external media coverage. Such ceremonies are valuable in demonstrating, both to internal and external constituencies, that the campus values teaching as an academic activity. Campuses can also spotlight teaching by asking award-winning faculty to facilitate workshops for other faculty, offer a "distinguished lecture" on teaching, or serve as a master teacher or mentor for new faculty.
Many campuses also connect teaching awards to such long-term rewards as tenure, promotion, and merit increases. For example, at University of California, Berkeley, the Academic Senate personnel committee that reviews all merit raises and promotions on campus instituted a policy in 1991 that gives senior faculty members a one-step increase for meritorious teaching. Because receiving the teaching award is considered evidence of meritorious teaching, this policy has served both to recognize the importance of the award and enhance its prestige.

Creating Other Incentives to Sustain Good Teaching

Campuswide teaching awards do highlight outstanding teaching, but announcing a handful of awards each year does not directly acknowledge the large number of faculty members who are committed to excellence in teaching. To more broadly reaffirm the value of teaching, and to recognize and support innovation, campuses can move beyond a once-a-year ceremony.

**Offer More Awards for Excellent Teachers.** In addition to presenting one major campuswide teaching award, some universities have established smaller and more diverse award programs. For example, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, recently instituted a College Outstanding Teacher Award to augment the campus's distinguished teaching awards. Each of the university's colleges and schools selects one or two outstanding faculty members each year, who receive a cash award ($1,000) and a commemorative plaque. They are also featured in the campus newspaper and recognized at undergraduate commencement exercises.

The University of California, Berkeley, also has a program of encouraging local recognition at the departmental and college level. In addition, there are discipline-specific awards that cut across departments (for example, the Noyce award for excellence in teaching in the physical sciences).

Another innovative reward for teaching is the Faculty Associate Program, developed by the Center for Teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Faculty associates are drawn from the ranks of former teaching award recipients and receive release time from one course per year for two years to offer center-sponsored workshops, collaborate on special projects, and act as general consultants throughout the academic year. Other campuses provide rotating endowed chairs for distinguished teachers (each chair held for a specific number of years), "master teacher" awards, and "distinguished mentor" or "outstanding advisor" awards.

**Create Teaching Communities and Rewards for Departments and Colleges.** Campus leaders at some research universities have urged that the focus of incentives for good teaching be broadened from individual faculty members to departments. A number of universities have inaugurated teaching awards to departments to emphasize the cooperative nature of university teaching (Wergin, 1993).

At the University of California, Berkeley, the Educational Initiatives Award (carrying $10,000) is given to a department or unit that makes a distinctive contribution to undergraduate education by creating "an outstanding program
or initiative that could serve as a model for other departments." Qualifying initiatives include major curricular reform, exemplary advising or mentoring programs, major overhaul of service courses, enhanced research opportunities for undergraduates, and innovative use of graduate student instructors.

In order to encourage departmental initiatives aimed at improving undergraduate education, enhancing a multicultural environment, and better preparing graduate students for careers that include teaching, the dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, offers annual prizes of $5,000 for each of the following: the best departmental proposal to improve the quality or delivery of instruction or services to undergraduates, the best departmental proposal to extend the curriculum into new cultural areas or to support students and teachers who venture into these new areas, and the best departmental proposal to improve the preparation or evaluation of graduate students as teachers.

**Develop an Active Academy of Distinguished Teachers.** To sustain a sense of community and enthusiasm among award-winning faculty, some campuses convene the distinguished teachers to undertake special projects or advise and consult on issues facing the campus (see Chapter Four). For example, the group of distinguished teachers at Berkeley has met periodically to provide leadership in teaching and instruction. At the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the chancellor has just initiated an annual reception for distinguished teaching—award winners in order to seek their advice on teaching matters.

**Publicize the Achievements of Exemplary Teachers.** Many campuses publicize profiles of recipients of the teaching award. At the University of California, Berkeley, essays about good teaching written by distinguished teachers as part of their nomination for the award have been compiled into *What Good Teachers Say About Teaching* (Tollefson and Davis, 1994).

At the University of Massachusetts, considerable publicity is also given to distinguished teaching award recipients through the campus newspaper, local newspapers, the alumni magazine, and other university publications. In addition, the campus’s Center for Teaching highlights selected teaching award winners as facilitators in its annual series of campuswide workshops and seminars.

**Provide Additional Support for Innovations in Teaching.** Institutional commitment can also be expressed through modest financial awards made to faculty members interested in improving a course or the teaching of it. Our informal surveys indicate that many research universities, including our own, award a range of faculty grants for teaching development.

For example, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, annually awards Faculty Grants for Teaching, Multicultural Initiatives, and Service Learning Grants to encourage faculty to explore new approaches to instruction. Each program has different criteria and review processes as well as varying resources to assist grantees in completing their projects. Grants are small—no more than $2,000—but often provide the seed money that leads to matching funds from other internal or external sources.

At University of California, Berkeley, avenues for innovation in teaching include the Minigrant, Classroom Technology, and Service Learning grant
programs for faculty. Each program has different criteria and levels of funding, for example, the maximum award for a minigrant is $1,000, for a classroom technology grant, $3,500.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered some practical steps for administering teaching awards programs and creating other incentives for excellence in teaching. Of course, no one prize or activity in itself is sufficient to convey a campus’s commitment to teaching. But when institutions recognize outstanding faculty or groups of faculty, they do more than merely honor individuals. They set standards for emulation and signal campus ideals. A strong network of incentives and rewards for good teaching thus contributes to campus values and cultures. At the Universities of California and Massachusetts and at other research universities, much is being done to affirm the theme that teaching and research are complementary—not competing—aspects of professional life.

References


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