Whoever Said a Teaching Career Has Anything to do with Teaching?: Thoughts for Those Thinking about a General Education Program

William C. Baum
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation
Baum, William C. (1994) "Whoever Said a Teaching Career Has Anything to do with Teaching?: Thoughts for Those Thinking about a General Education Program," Grand Valley Review: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol10/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
WHOEVER SAID A TEACHING CAREER HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH TEACHING?: THOUGHTS FOR THOSE THINKING ABOUT A GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

William C. Baum

Abstract: Attempts to consider and adopt general education programs will encounter a lack of faculty enthusiasm and support. This paper will argue that many factors inherent in the American academic system discourage any activity not clearly connected with the ultimate sign of academic professionalism: the publication of research. Those interested in a serious discussion of general education should understand this.

Note: The reader will be forgiven if he/she expresses disappointment in failing to find a learned epistle here on the nature and content of a quality general education program. It is hoped the same compassion will be extended to the author for dealing with matters which seem to interfere with discussions about such programs taking place at all.

At the beginning of a "teaching" career which normally spans 35-40 years, the young academic is thrust into an environment which reinforces the norms already burned into the psyche during the graduate years just experienced.

But unlike the graduate school environment where a form of slavery is always understood as short-term, rarely exceeding 5 or 6 years, the new instructor enters a system which will provide a lifetime of job security provided, of course, that the rules of the system are both acknowledged and followed for seven years. The most important of these rules are easy to identify because they are associated with the ultimate in job assurance: academic tenure.

A few of the rules, together with structural components which reinforce them, will be identified and briefly discussed:

1. Your primary obligation to the institution is to publish. Publication of your research is necessary for any serious candidate for tenure. It is preferable to have a book published by a prestige house or an article published in a leading scholarly journal, but any publication is far better than no publication. Whether the published work is significant or read by anyone else is irrelevant. Publishing is the name of the game. As one colleague quipped, "Deans can't read, but they can count."
2. **Your primary obligation to yourself is to publish.**

   Whether or not you care about tenure at any specific institution, your marketability depends on your list of publications. But, of course, you are in a double bind: you still must play along with the rules of your institution regarding tenure to even be a serious candidate for other positions. One cannot be deemed irresponsible. Publication is the measure of ability, responsibility and character.

3. **The ultimate sign of accomplishment: no teaching at all.**

   Let us assume that a normal course has transpired and tenure has been awarded. We now have a professor with a few gray hairs, a few publications, a fattened curriculum vitae, and tenure. It will now be possible to relax, teach some courses and generally hang out. Hmmmmm... it is even possible to give some thought to the general education program. A few will (and do) attend the planning meetings for general education. Most, however, will focus on research as a prelude to publication and then making it into the fast track.

   Academic life on this fast track doesn't normally include the following impediments: large undergraduate classes, twelve hour classroom teaching duties and commitments to general education programs or other such diversions. These are obstructions to be removed as soon as possible or avoided altogether. If academic success is ultimately associated with the nature and volume of one's publications, professional visibility and research grants, while teaching is understood for what it is: at worst, a necessary evil; at best, a chore better done by others.

4. **The realities of the department.**

   A stern enforcer of academic norms is the surrogate family for the young academic. Normally termed "the department," in this environment, more than a few academics lose their innocence. Accustomed to the rapid changes which accompany undergraduate and graduate life, the new faculty member is seldom prepared for the rigidity and permanence of departmental politics. Almost immediately and much sooner than one would ever wish, questions about gender, research interests, wine preferences, deconstruction and a host of other matters, all with overtones of political correctness, invade the consciousness of the new arrival.

   Playing it safe becomes another burden the young academic must carry. But how? Fortunately, there is a beacon which can always be followed: however petty and mean the politics of the department, publication is always the savior. No matter how politically incorrect the newcomer may be, even the most offended departmental colleague will acknowledge the significance of anyone busy with research and active in publishing. Everyone in the department will understand the story of the disciples gathered around the oasis poolside. One disciple turns to another and exclaims: "Boy, that Jesus Christ is sure a great teacher." "Maybe," says another, "but what's he published?"
Conclusions and Recommendations

A few rules of the academic game identified here have been presented in the form of a warning lest anyone continues to believe that a quality general education program will be the result of some form of spontaneous faculty combustion. One major thrust of the present discussion has been to illustrate how present academic norms absorb a tremendous amount of the faculty time and energy which might otherwise be used in curriculum development. Nevertheless, there is much curriculum development in the "publish or get out" environment, but note how it is closely tied to the narrowest possible tangent of the professor's expertise. This behavior can be found as well in discussions about general education and curriculum reform: each discussant brings to the table a commitment to discuss and negotiate only within the boundaries of his or her own dissertation area and subsequent research (normally the same area).

This behavior is neither surprising nor deplorable, but it would be incorrect to conclude that nothing can be done about it. A basic recommendation: The administration of GVSU should completely re-evaluate the present hiring system which creates a two-class system, because this system undermines any commitment to quality teaching and institutional loyalty. Just think: the system rewards publishing, any publishing, and the overall system frustrates any interest in good teaching by failing (in the main) to honor and reward it.

To be fair about this, GVSU has historically given more attention to good teaching than the discussion here would indicate. Nevertheless, this is being reversed by the recent establishment of a system which "rewards" publication with a higher salary and a lower teaching load. Only the totally unambitious numbskull can fail to note how a career, including tenure, is established and secured.

What is seldom acknowledged and understood about this reward system is that it encourages a form of disloyalty. An emphasis on research which leads to publication encourages faculty to maximize their relationship with the "invisible college" of scholars who share a subject matter area and an information network and perhaps neglect their students and classroom duties.

It is important not to misunderstand what is being said here: nothing here is to be understood as a criticism of good scholarship and worthy publication. All of us are dependent upon the very best in published scholarship to inform and stimulate us in all of our academic activities.

But I am personally convinced that those who have something important to say will publish it. There are hundreds of publishers and thousands of journal editors looking for manuscripts. Even in a homogenized world, cream will rise to the top. The institution should reward those who are productive in the publication of their research. But at the same time, does it seem reasonable to demand that all incoming faculty prove their mettle by publishing anything, regardless of significance?
Now it is quite possible everyone benefits from the status quo; faculty members can get on with their careers and enter into a form of free agency, students can get on with their parties and off-campus jobs and obligations; administrators can continue to manage a campus wherein all are united in their anarchy. What this suggests for general education and any genuine concern for what might be a core curriculum for our students is, of course, only a continuation of what we are now doing. And heaven knows, student and faculty protests and rebellions are hardly ever held in the name of curricula reform leading to more rigorous and demanding courses in a general program. But do we know what might result if a courageous administration did the following: recognize the following 15 faculty members as among our very best and support them in their establishment of a core of X number of courses which will satisfy the general education requirements for 150 students to be selected by the faculty. We will evaluate this experiment while it is being conducted and with follow up studies later.

This is only a suggested route to follow. Other examples could be easily found. But the point is this: given the present system of rewards and the norms which demand publication above everything else, it will take strong leadership from key administrators to bring about any curriculum reform. Given the nature of faculty politics, the role of the administrators is more important than even they may realize.

In the meantime, the faculty could play a major role in all of this—beginning at once. Wouldn't it be something if interviews and everything connected with the hiring of faculty included as much concern for teaching ability and commitments to teaching as is presently given to the prospects for publishing? This, it seems to me, would help to establish a better environment for a discussion of educational programs, general education included.