

# ACADEMIC PROGRAMS



College of Agricultural,  
Consumer and  
Environmental Sciences

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

From the Office of the Associate Dean

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## Five Key Changes to Practice

In *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, Mary Weimer identifies five aspects of current instructional practice that adversely affect learning, recommend and illustrate alternative approaches, and document the positive impact of the approaches. Even a brief exploration of each illustrates how much changes when learning is the focus of all aspects of instruction. This is the third "Key Change."

### The Responsibility for Learning

*The problem: Faculty "force" learning on reluctant participants.*

Faculty often respond to passive, immature, and ill-prepared students by creating rules and requirements that govern learning activities. Attendance is mandatory, make-up exams are prohibited, and late papers are not accepted. Assignments are submitted in installments; participation is required. If students haven't figured out what it takes to learn, rules will be established.

Motivation is also supplied. Quizzes encourage students to keep up with the reading. Extra credit motivates them to track down a reference. Bonus points offer incentives to complete homework. Classrooms have become token economies where students perform for points, not for reasons related to learning.

*The solution: Faculty should create learning environments that motivate students to accept responsibility for learning.*

In learner-centered environments, students do what it takes to learn on their own, without or with fewer externally imposed rules and requirements. Classroom environments can affect the motivation to learn and the willingness to accept responsibility for learning in pervasive and significant ways.

Relationships between teacher and students and among students themselves are personal and they engage students, connecting them with the content and each other. In learner-centered classrooms, teachers respond to individual learning needs with carefully organized and innovative activities.

*An example:* Learning environments can be structured so that they solve pesky, mundane problems like getting

students to class on time. I once arrived five minutes before a class I was observing started; most of the class and the instructor were already there. An overhead on the projector listed the homework problems for the day. It remained there for two minutes after class started, then was taken down and never put back up. Arrive late to that class and you missed something important, the homework.

The principle that there be direct consequences for student action (or inaction) applies to countless aspects of instruction. Do students come to class without having done the reading? What happens to them as a result of that? Students should experience consequences when they come to class unprepared. They should not be rewarded with a carefully crafted summary supplied by the teacher.

*The result: Students grow increasingly autonomous and need teachers less.*

When students are more in charge of their own learning, they rely less on teachers. Those who study autonomous learners provide compelling portraits of mature, responsible students.

Self-regulated learners are aware when they know a fact or possess a skill and when they do not. Self-regulated students proactively seek out information when needed and take steps to master it. When they encounter obstacles such as poor study conditions, confusing teachers, or abstruse textbooks, they find a way to succeed. (Zimmerman, 1990)

But faculty should not worry about being phased out any time soon. Most college students today start from the other end of the dependent/independent continuum. Adapted from an article in *Change*, September/October 2003.

*The activity of thinking prefigures, prepares for, and lets us practice the freedom of mind we require to exercise discerning judgement while living among people who differ from us.*

- Elizabeth Minnich, *Change*, September/October, 2003

# ACES Diversity

Dr. Blannie Bowen, Penn State University, was the key note speaker for the ACES Brown v. Board of Education Commemoration in November. Dr. Bowen offered seven “Diversity Challenges” for ACES.

- 1) A Shared Understanding
  1. How does ACES define diversity?
  2. How does ACES distribute (and discuss) diversity information to students, faculty, & staff?
  3. What role for ACES minority coordinator?
- 2) A Welcoming Climate
  1. How do ACES (and department) leaders demonstrate visible support for diversity?
  2. How does ACES identify climate issues?
  3. How does ACES respond to climate issues?
  4. What approaches enhance climate & individual’s satisfaction?
- 3) A Diverse Student Body
  1. How does ACES locate & recruit underrepresented students?
  2. What strategies has ACES implemented to retain underrepresented students?
  3. What recruitment & retention strategies work best?
- 4) Diverse Workforce
  1. How does ACES locate & recruit underrepresented faculty & staff?
  2. What strategies are most successful?
  3. What strategies retain underrepresented faculty & staff?
  4. What strategies are most successful?
- 5) Curriculum Innovation
  1. What ACES initiatives support multicultural curriculum efforts?
  2. What ACES research & teaching advance UIUC diversity agenda?
  3. How is diversity integrated into ACES curricula?
- 6) Leadership & Management
  1. How does ACES help underrepresented staff & faculty develop leadership & management skills?
  2. What are the success indicators?
- 7) Coordinating Change
  1. What organization realignments, systems of accountability, resource mobilization, allocation strategies, long-term planning strategies, etc. help ACES reach its diversity goals?

Dr. Bowen concluded his remarks with seven “Golden Opportunities.”

1. How do you reward action (P&T, annual, raises, merit)?
2. What are the diversity goals for faculty, staff, & students (% of state population)?
3. How can you help fill the pipeline (McNair, SROP, NSF training grants, USDA scholars)?
4. How can you better use reciprocal measures within the CIC to place African-American PhD’s?
5. How do you place more African-American PhD’s as faculty?
6. How can my research involve more African - Americans?
7. The South has risen! How do I entice minorities from elsewhere - north, west, and east?

The lecture was sponsored by the Office of the Chancellor and ACES Academic Programs. An audio archive of the lecture can be accessed at <http://will.uiuc.edu/community/brownarchives.htm>.

## ACES Courses Portal

Have you checked out the ACES courses portal lately? Go to <http://dc.aces.uiuc.edu>.

If the courses you teach have “no syllabus available” you need to contact [acwebbet@uiuc.edu](mailto:acwebbet@uiuc.edu).

The search engine is also in operation, allowing students (including non-ACES students) to find courses by key words. Key in “environment” and see what happens! Or choose a word that you believe should lead to one of your courses.

The ACES courses portal is designed to be an easy way for students to “find” courses and learn more than what is included in the Courses Catalog without entering a secured web site for current students in the course. Linking to a generic course syllabus can be an important aid as students select electives or try to find courses they may like to take to discover a new major. ACES faculty are urged to be a part of this important activity.

*Teacher authority, in part defined as the right to make these decisions, is so taken for granted that most faculty members no longer recognize the extent to which they direct student learning.*

- Maryellen Weimer, *Change*,  
September/October, 2003

## Why Students Resist Innovative Teaching Methods

Educational reform and innovation have been slow to take hold within the academy. Straight lecture still prevails in many classrooms despite compelling empirical evidence that students learn more, retain it better, and think about it at higher levels when they are actively involved. Why does change come slowly? Consider four reasons students may prefer a lecture format. Most of us who've tried innovative approaches can relate to these students responses.

### **Traditional methods are familiar and comfortable.**

It's the way they've been taught and the method under which most of them have successfully found their way to college. They know what they're supposed to do, and they've proved that they can do it. It's not that these students are afraid of the new approaches per se; it's what they think those approaches might do to the almighty grade.

**Traditional methods are easier.** Lectures encourage students to be passive. There might be a couple of questions, but usually the same students answer those. If class requires discussion of pre-assignment materials in groups with discussion products then presented to the rest of the class, that's more work and students resist. They often do so by pointing out that they didn't pay to teach themselves.

**Sheer laziness stands in the way of change.** When students miss a lecture, they operate under the assumptions (although they seldom test it) that they can get notes from somebody else and be covered. They haven't missed anything! Miss a group activity and nobody has notes to copy and nothing in the text "covers" what happened in the group. Students today opt for ways that require less work. They are busy, lead complicated lives, and are accustomed to instant gratification, which explains why many think that learning ought to occur with minimum effort and no pain.

**Traditional methods obscure the varying paces at which people learn.** If you're bright and grasp the material quickly, you don't want to wait around for the rest of the group or worse yet devote your time and energy trying to explain it to less-enlightened others. In lecture, the instructor may repeat material you already understand, but during that explanation you can just sit quietly and do nothing. If you're not as bright and don't grasp the material quickly, those knowledge gaps will more likely get revealed in a discussion with fellow classmates, something painful and worth trying to avoid. But in a lecture, nobody knows, and you can always con yourself into believing that you'll get it by test time.

And how do faculty tackle these kinds of student resistance? By committing themselves to reform, by taking risks and thereby ensuring that educational reform doesn't become an endless discussion - with no results.

From an article by Mark Benvenuto in *The Teaching Professor*, December 2003.

## Peer Factor

From an article by Eric Hoover, *The Chronicle of Higher Education Online*, February 7, 2003.

George R. Goethals, a professor of psychology at Williams, has explored the relationship of peer effects to students' performances in classroom settings.

"We started with the belief that since people influence each other, the more smarter students there are around the better, but our work show that it's not that simple," Mr. Goethals says. "The concept of students rubbing off on each other is complicated."

In one experiment, Mr. Goethals asked whether students in the bottom third of their freshman class, with average SAT scores of 1300, would perform better writing about newspaper articles they read and discussed in groups of three if the two others in the groups were academically superior, and had average SAT scores of 1500, instead of with students who were also in the bottom third of the class. The results showed that women performed better if their partners were in the top third, while men did better when their partners were from the bottom third.

In a similar experiment, Mr. Goethals examined whether students performed better in groups of three that were academically homogeneous, in which all student were either in the top or bottom half of their freshman class, based on the academic rating assigned during the admissions process.

The results showed that students paired with similar peers, whether in the top or the bottom group, performed significantly better than if one or both of their peers were different.

Those results suggest that while superior students may foster better performances in some peers, others may find the company of intellectually superior students discouraging or intimidating.

"Students are extremely alive to what they do and do not have in common with those around them, to intellectual differences," Mr. Goethals says. "Sometimes, that affects their intellectual engagement, sometimes it doesn't. The issue is not so much intellectual ability as intellectual engagement - students engage more with students they feel more comfortable with."

## Higher Education Challenge Grants

Be sure to check out the solicitation for proposals in the Higher Education Challenge Grants Program through USDA. Applications are due February 4, 2004. Go to <http://reusda.gov>, select Funding Opportunities and then the HEC program.

## Combating Reduced Rigor and Grade Inflation

If reduced rigor and grade inflation are in fact major problems on our campuses, then what are the remedies that might help improve the current situation? The following are some recommendations for your consideration.

First, it is time to recognize, honor, respect, and treat students as students and not as customers. The dictionary I consult defines students as scholars, learners, and those who study. It does not define students as retail customers buying degrees. Yet the phrase, "I treat students as customers," has become all too common on college campuses.

Second, the misuse and overemphasis of student evaluation of teaching instruments needs to be addressed. Obviously, students can and should provide feedback on some limited aspects of teaching. However, as a committee at my university recently reported, the process measures student satisfaction instead of the quality of instruction, has questionable reliability, and does not take into account certain factors that influence the scores.

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Third, peer evaluation of teaching must be upgraded in terms of importance, process, extent, and rigor. However, evaluation of teaching must involve more than occasional classroom observations. In order to maintain academic standards, peers have the responsibility and obligation to evaluate faculty in terms of the rigor of their course content, assignments, graded materials and tests, and to verify that the evaluation of student work is appropriate.

Fourth, administrators need to recognize that colleges that maintain appropriate academic standards and make a public commitment to quality become more competitive in the long run in terms of the types and numbers of students they attract. Reducing rigor and inflating grades in order to placate students, improve retention, and increase graduation rates is self-defeating.

Fifth, a graduation requirement that all students pass comprehensive final exams based on content drawn from all areas of the curriculum should be instituted at the undergraduate level. Since students will know that they will have to acquire and demonstrate competence in all subject areas as a condition of graduation, it will be counterproductive for them to just get by in their course work or pick easy courses. Instructors will have much more incentive to uphold academic standards.

Sixth, and perhaps the most essential of all, students must be educated on the importance and benefits of appropriate rigor and grading standards to their self-interests and careers.

Higher education is defined and judged by its graduates. Rigorous academic standards are the key to high quality college graduates. Faculty, administrators, and students must work together to reverse the tendencies for rigor and grade inflation.

By Allen Zimmerman, Ohio State University, Adapted from *ASAE Magazine*, March 2003.