

THE PROSPECTS FOR CREATIVE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

A discussion with Patricia Sanders, Dean of Business at Siena College is conducted. Dean Sanders ponders the question regarding the role of teaching in our colleges and provides some of her answers to the challenges facing higher education today.

INTRODUCTION

In the film Fiddler on the Roof the Rain character Tevye rhetorically asked the question about his fiercely independent community, "How do we keep our balance?" He answered his question with the single word "tradition!" Tevye then asked another question. "How did our traditions get started?" His answer was "I don't know, but because of our traditions everyone knows who he is."

I have posed these questions over the past few years to business faculty and the answers have been interesting. First, I rarely get an answer without the need for further explanation. Second, when the question is answered it is rarely answered with "teaching" or the "student experience". Yet historically, teaching has been the heart of our enterprises and students are the reason for our profession's existence. What precisely our traditions and where and when did our "teaching" balance become "undone"?

I approach this discussion on creative teaching in a quasi-historical fashion supported by personal and professional anecdotes. While I strongly believe creative teaching and teaching excellence does exist and always has, I also believe that certain trends have served as disincentives to realizing creative teaching over the past 50 years. These trends include (1) an obsession with counting in the form of head counts, session counts, student credit hours, faculty load, faculty

"productivity" and cost containment, (2) a focus on credentialing or degree "production" rather than on learning and sharing knowledge, (3) compromising the line between academic freedoms and professional responsibility and (4) placing teaching, research and service in discrete categories. In Raking these observations I am not suggesting we abandon credit accumulation schema, discontinue the granting of degrees or relinquishing academic freedom. When these "traditions" interfere with creative teaching or creating an exciting learning environment, however, they must be reexamined and challenged.

Moving from a historical perspective where do we stand now? I believe we tend to separate our activities into opposite or Mutually-exclusive positions-teaching vs. learning, simulations vs. experiential exercises, the past vs. the future. In reality these activities lie on a continuum and can benefit from greater integration while maintaining our "roots" in the student experience. A recent report entitled "Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience" published by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges rejected three beliefs and traditions commonly-held in higher education.

The first rejected belief holds that a college education ends with a degree. The second is that the student experience is reserved for those between the ages of 18 and 25 and who are willing to attend school full-time. The third is that the university's experience is restricted to its physical campus boundaries. These beliefs are being challenged and this challenge extends well beyond public and land grant universities. Business programs in small liberal arts institutions have a special role and they can contribute handily to managerial education and creative collaborations between various constituencies.

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Now let's look at the future of creative teaching and institutional vitality and reinvigoration. In traveling around the world and observing higher education in other places, it can be concluded without bias that we in the United States have invented teaching effectiveness and are world leaders in this area. The fact that our systems are emulated in so many corners of the world attests to this. Yet many challenges lie ahead for us. These include:

Creating new partnerships between faculty and students. Professors will no longer be the knowledge experts in the classroom. Instead professor will become facilitators in a learning environment and students will assume greater responsibility for obtaining educational outcomes.

Alliances will be created with "nontraditional" educational providers. We can view the growing number of corporate universities and for-profit providers as competitors or as partners. The institutions that develop creative alliances with these providers will be the winners.

Reestablishing the public's trust in teaching. Teaching is a public trust as parents trust us with their students as well as with their tuition dollars. The business community trusts us to turn out well-educated students and a well-prepared workforce. Various governments and foundations trust us with subsidies and scholarship dollars. This trust has eroded, however, as the perceived value of a college education has not kept pace with that education's rising cost.

Increasing the institution's flexibility and redefining its governance. The institution's bureaucracy, and its needs for quantified inputs and outputs, stifles creative teaching. We need to be diligent in developing structures that promote creative teaching, team teaching and interdisciplinary teaching.

Integrating competing positions and philosophies regarding the nature of the professor's lifework. The "versus" dichotomies presented earlier must

be removed and replaced by "ands". For example, new knowledge must be researched and discovered and then passed onto students. At other times a nagging question posed by a student can lead to an interesting research project.

The courage to put students first. From their inception universities were established to serve students. In our post-World War II society, however, pure research became the goal and it became king and teaching became the peasant.

This is a lengthy and ambitious list of challenges. Without sounding trite these challenges also represent opportunities. We are educators on the edge of a new millennium. It is exciting, as well as somewhat overwhelming, to realize we have an opportunity to shape the contours of higher education well into the next century. In the final analysis even traditions change. Our challenge will be merging the strengths of today's traditions with the opportunities afforded us to create a new set of traditions that will take us to the 21st century and beyond.