

Yale College

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To: Chairs and DUSes of Yale College Departments and Programs
From: Richard H. Brodhead, Dean of Yale College

I write to register a few thoughts about undergraduate teaching, the value we should attach to it, and the steps we can take to foster it. These remarks are meant as a codification (I trust) of sentiments already widely shared, not bursts of original insight. I spell them out on the theory that it might still be worth reminding ourselves from time to time of the principles that govern such a central part of our work. Please feel free to share these thoughts with your colleagues.

Yale's great distinction is that it aspires at once to the rigor of a world-class research university and to the educational intimacy of a college. These ambitions, we know, can seem contradictory, and at plenty of other schools one of them has been sacrificed to the other. Yale's hope is to prove that they can be complementary, not mutually exclusive, by fulfilling both goals in practice. But this mission puts a special burden on the Yale faculty.

A school with this double aim can't not require that each member of its faculty participate in the most advanced inquiry taking place in his or her field. At the same time, we fail of our ambition to the extent that we do not make as great a provision for the communication of knowledge as we make for its creation. I take it that it goes without saying that our faculty must be outstanding scholars, and our appointments procedures enforce this requirement quite vigorously. The teaching half of our mission gets taken somewhat more for granted, but just for this reason we must take special pains to keep it in mind as well.

To work out some obvious applications of these reflections:

The Course of Study. Yale chooses faculty members who possess highly developed specialized expertise, and such expertise is itself a great teaching resource: at Yale a student can watch advanced new thinking evolving, not just read about it in books. At the same time, the latest professional developments are not the only things undergraduates want and need to learn. We have to take pains to give them the full benefits of advanced work and to meet their other needs just as fully. In particular,

: We must take care that the elementary levels of instruction be presented with dedication and imagination, and we must take all the greater care of this just because the individual interests of full-time faculty are likely to lie well away from introductory matters.

: We must be sure that the broad general interests of academic fields—aspects taken for granted by the expert but still powerfully resonant to the layman—get proper attention in our course offerings. Our students have nothing to gain from a “back to the basics” movement that would exclude them from the excitement of experimental work. But it would be equally fatuous to

assume that all undergraduates already think like professionals, and ungenerous to serve only the ones who do.

: Since departments should feel responsible for the adequacy—even vitality—of every level of their instruction, the whole faculty of a department should be involved as much as possible in deliberations on pedagogy and curricular offerings. In reality much of this work is delegated to Directors of Undergraduate Studies and course directors, and this of course makes practical sense. The point would be not to let one person's efficiency allow others to ignore a corporate responsibility.

Appointments and Promotions. We all know, but we would still do well frequently to remind ourselves, that teaching should be given profound consideration in all hiring and promotion decisions. No one is hired at Yale only on the basis of teaching skill, but teacherly ability and commitment should always be regarded as indispensable criteria for appointment: we must insist on finding the person powerful as a scholar and as a teacher both, and not allow one strength alone to suffice. Good teaching comes, of course, in many forms, and we all know of (in conventional terms) “terrible” teachers who have had lasting impact on their students: judging valuable teaching will always take imagination. Just as obviously, Yale needs many kinds of good teachers: not every good undergraduate teacher is correspondingly successful at the graduate level, which we must also keep in mind. Nevertheless, we must resist the sometimes-encountered tendency simply to impute adequate teacherly virtue to an appointment desirable on other grounds without much evidence or reflection. Yale's faculty are not only valuable as teachers, but they are what Yale has for teachers—so their teaching can't be made a matter of indifference without steep institutional cost.

Enunciating Expectations. To put the matter positively, chairmen, DUSes, and others in leadership positions should always project the sense that teaching matters—that time and intelligence spent in teaching are well spent, are indeed a profound institutional expectation. When new faculty members join a department, chairs have an important obligation to brief them on the shape of education at Yale and the nature of our teacherly obligations. Sometimes one hears of faculty members who are not available to students outside of class or who even fail to keep an office on campus. These tales do not fit my own experience, which is that the Yale faculty are highly generous of their time and attention. But if there are occasional exceptions, the departmental administration should certainly make the proper expectations clear. The last thing we want at Yale is the sort of militant quantification of faculty teaching effort now being insisted on in some university systems. But the best defense against such idiocies is to perform our work in a fully conscientious way.

Encouragement of Teaching. Beyond clarifying formal expectations, departments can also play a powerful role in the active development of teaching skills. Some departments that make elaborate provisions for the exchange of research make little corresponding provision for the sharing of teaching experience. But good teaching, though always profoundly individual in the end, can benefit from communal wisdom: it is inefficient and worse to expect that each new practitioner reinvent the art on his own. The hands-off attitude that says “throw new teachers in the water and they'll learn to swim” leaves instructors isolated in their inexperience and conveys a powerful message of institutional indifference.

Particularly with new instructors, and always when graduate instructors are in question, the more seasoned teaching corps of a department should make itself available to discuss methods, goals, and the delicate arts by which beginner students can be engaged with advanced learning. (The assumption

that graduate students from very different educational backgrounds should be able, unaided, to intuit the nature of Yale undergraduate education seems particularly gratuitous.) But faculty of every level of seniority have something to gain by entering into a larger pedagogical dialogue rather than doing things “my way” from year to year. Observation of one another’s teaching is not the custom at Yale that it is at some schools, but there is no reason why it could not be constructive. If this course isn’t chosen, then better ones should be sought to ensure that teachers think about what they’re doing and how it might be improved. The efforts of the graduate student group Working Through Teaching provide a model we could all usefully consult.

I do not believe that the Yale faculty has fallen away from its historic mission and needs jeremiads to return it to the straight, high way. Yale remains, in my view, a great teaching institution, and I have been pleased to discover both how much and how inventively colleagues in every division worry about the quality of their instruction. Still, we must all wish for Yale to be as great an educational institution as it has the power to be. Paying attention to teaching is one means to this end.