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The System

Universities are faced with some hard choices in the immediate future as a consequence of rapidly mounting enrollments of both undergraduate and graduate students. One of these choices involves undergraduate education. For, in contrast to liberal-arts and other 4-year colleges, universities attempt to carry on two conflicting activities: the education of undergraduates for all kinds of occupations and the furtherance of research by both faculty and graduate students.

A peculiarity in university organization is that there is in general little differentiation in faculty function: a faculty member typically teaches undergraduates, does research, and supervises graduate students. These tasks demand quite different talents. To arouse interest, to lay bare the bones of a subject without too much qualification, in short to make an art of teaching, are the requirements for the one task; to carry on research, to teach by example, and to give general guidance to students already well immersed in a subject are the requirements of the other.

It is true that here and there some division of labor has occurred. Some professors, usually called research professors, never deal with undergraduates, and some others devote all or almost all of their efforts to undergraduate teaching. But this differentiation is exceptional, and the question remains: Why have universities in general failed to differentiate faculty functions more sharply? Part of the explanation surely is to be sought in the implicit value systems of faculties and administrators. Research and the training of graduate students are valued highly by the faculty; teaching, by contrast, is second-class. Administrators, however, according to a recent study for the American Council on Education, rate teaching as highly important and indeed regard, or at least claim to regard, teaching ability as the single most important factor in judging the worth of faculty members. Despite this kind of assurance about the value of teaching, few university faculty members believe that time devoted to teaching will receive either recognition or reward. It is a more usual, and probably a more realistic, view that time taken for teaching is time stolen from research, and that the road to academic heaven is paved with publications.

These widely prevalent beliefs of faculty members have a baneful influence on the quality of undergraduate education. Those who make the decisions about promotions in universities might well consider the balanced appraisal made by Abraham Flexner in 1930: "Original thinkers and investigators do not . . . represent the only type of university professor. They will always be the distinguished figures; theirs will usually be the most profound and far-reaching influence. But even universities, modern universities, need and use men of a different stamp—teachers whose own contributions to learning are of less importance than their influence in stimulating students or their resourcefulness in bringing together the researches of others."

Since this statement was made, the emphasis on research has tipped the balance still further away from undergraduate education. The universities have two possible courses of action: they can become "senior" colleges and graduate schools and thus leave all or part of undergraduate education to the junior colleges and the 4-year colleges, or they can find some way to change their value system by giving more than lip service to making teaching a rewarding career.—G.DuS.