



Teaching Excellence in Higher Education

Gregory, Marshall, edited by Gregory, Melissa Valiska
Palgrave Macmillan Springer Nature, 2013

Book Review

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Reviewed by: Ronald R. Bernier, *Wentworth Institute of Technology*

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There is a loss of confidence in college education today that is arguably unmatched at any point in modern American history. Government officials and the general public express concern about the goals and directions of higher education and the degree to which its institutions succeed or fail to meet the needs of society. Business leaders and state legislatures charge that our colleges and universities are overpriced, underperforming, and unaccountable to the public. Moreover, the modern institution of higher education faces declining growth and increasing operational complexity; meanwhile, costs continue to soar and resources become ever more difficult to secure. Indeed, the role and very definition of higher education has changed significantly in recent years. The focus now is on issues of relevance, applicability, and preparation for working life outside the academy's protective walls, and difficult questions are being asked about cost, efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness.

One educator, however, in a heartfelt culmination of a lifetime's devotion to the classroom, offers a vision of education in the deepest sense: "a vision of what education is for in an existential, not merely an instrumental, sense" (4). Marshall Gregory's posthumous *Teaching Excellence in Higher Education* is a beautifully written, insightful, humorous, and jargon-free reflection on pedagogical theory and an ethical vision for teaching as it should be, not necessarily as it is. "Excellence," too-often a vapid buzzword deployed in the literature on higher education today - suitably vague as to commit to nothing, really - is anything but lifeless with Gregory's masterful handling. The book, edited by his daughter, Melissa Valiska Gregory, associate professor of English at the University of Toledo, after the untimely death of her father, Harry Ice Professor of English, Liberal Education, and Pedagogy at Butler University for many years, reads like a teacher's memoir, tracing the way he came to think about his students, his vocation, and his vision for education over the years. "Excellence" for

Gregory is the “‘extra’ burden of helping students become the kind of citizens, neighbors, voters, spouses, parents, and general thinkers who play all of their life roles with judiciousness, thoughtfulness, and the ability to endure cognitive dissonance, ambiguity, and complexity” (18). A tall order indeed, but anything less, he insists, “is merely the training of expertise.”

While higher education has acknowledged for some time that it is woefully deficient in teaching young graduate students to teach, Gregory takes this concern in a refreshing direction, not simply as a matter of classroom mechanics (protocols such as classroom management, syllabus design, testing, grading, and so forth) and the structures of our disciplines; rather, he digs deeper. Our training as researchers and scholars, Gregory argues, have obscured what we, as educators, really need to know in the classroom. He offers the seemingly startling claim that our individual disciplines are, in effect, beside the point; they are, rather, a means to something far more complex. Teaching excellence, he suggests, depends on our awareness of the difference between the intellectual content of our disciplines – the subject matter of our courses – and what he identifies as the “background issues” of ethical dynamics: “The deepest kind of learning is the learning that makes persons desire not some particular thing or some particular doctrine, but instead makes them desire to become someone different – more self-aware, more autonomous, more self-critical, more judicious, more thoughtful, less impulsive, and less in thrall to the clichés of their day and moment” (61). His is a vision informed by cognitive psychology and by the lasting wisdom of the humanist tradition itself. Gregory does this by coupling (re-coupling) intellect with ethics: “The ‘who’ that any of us is ethically is in large part a function of the ‘what’ that any of us knows intellectually” (79). Ethics, in other words, is not something to be grafted onto our teaching, as in statements of classroom conduct for students and guidelines for ethical behavior for faculty; rather, it is part of the very ether of the classroom experience, “running in the background like software code” (6). He sums up this negotiation quite nicely in a set of unspoken questions students ask of teachers and teachers ask of their students: “Are you honest? Are you kind?... Are you sensitive and fair, or are you a selfish pig and an insensitive butt head” (82). The ethical demands on teachers are many, and they are exacting dispositions: “open mindedness, creativity, curiosity, intellectual flexibility, civility, making good arguments, having a nose for evidence, making defensible judgments, and so on” (75). But these demands for ethical commitment – fairness, respect, charity, and civility – are not, Gregory reminds himself as well as his readers, some Hallmark card version of classroom *kumbaya*. They are defenses, in a sense, in the struggle against a notion of education as narrow utilitarianism and credentialing. It is not that those who have entered the profession with some genuine sense of vocation are unaware of these principles; rather, the disciplinary focus and scholarly commitment to content have obscured them, or trained teachers not to pay them much mind. The reclaiming

of “excellence” for higher education is, for Gregory, a teacher of teachers, the performing of an “authentic, autonomous, thoughtful, socially responsible, and morally defensible life” (113).

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