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SUMMARIES OF BREAKOUT SESSIONS ON ACADEMIC RIGOR – March 4, 2009

*Summary of the **culture of academic rigor***

“Culture” – from cultivation of the soil and all the things needed to maintain the agriculture that maintains the society (e.g., religion, laws, and customs).

Academic rigor comes out of a culture where

- at some level, everybody is involved with and committed to an education that is challenging, but also positive and even exciting;
- students are motivated;
- motivated students understand that they must remember many things they learn in courses and build on that memory when they take new courses;
- the instructor challenges the students with course requirements that are expected of anyone studying the discipline;
- the instructors respect the integrity of each discipline,

One example: instructors in the humanities courses that involve interpretations will

– value the diversity of thought among the students but

– require that different opinions be validated with solid knowledge of the facts and with clear reasoning;

- the instructor’s love of “learning for itself” inspires students;
- faculty, when they are planning their own courses, keep in mind what is done at other institutions, even the prestigious ones (e.g., textbooks used and material covered).

How can academic rigor be reconciled with the following?

- In any class, the background preparation, brains, and motivation of the students are at different levels.
- The instructor has to “intrigue” and challenge the better students but not alienate the others.
- Students tell faculty that they will lose their scholarships if their grades are low.
- Students are under a lot of pressure:
 - They may have three or four classes in one day – maybe back-to-back.
 - They have to give priority levels to their courses.
 - Their ability to stay interested in a course may be influenced by the time of day when they take the course.
- Some sections of a course have an enthusiasm and dynamic where learning flourishes; students almost welcome the challenge of rigor. In other sections of the same course, students are mostly mute and passive. (The male/female ratio in the class may have something to do with this.)

- The Millennial Generation is used to instant gratification. Communication, information, and entertainment are always available – in a few clicks. Getting students to discern the good from the bad in all this information is a challenge.

Miscellaneous Statements

We faculty are to blame for low expectations.

Sometimes, a rigorous advanced class in a major is a wonderful, enjoyable experience for both students and instructor.

In some cases, a rigorous course needs student participation in discussion. To get some insights on class discussions, this book is helpful: Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*.

Report from **CULTURE OF ACADEMIC RIGOR** group discussion:

Main Points:

1. Both faculty and students underestimate what can be done in a course. Faculty sometimes think the students are not “up to it” and do not push them. The students sell themselves short, or are not willing to take the small steps that will make them better students.
2. Effort and performance are not equal. Just because a student has “studied” or “worked hard” does not mean that the student deserves a good grade. Quality of work and effort to get to that quality are not the same. What do we reward? Coming to class? turning things in on time? tangibles that the students can understand and we can count? Determining excellence is more difficult.
3. Our society in general tries to do many things. High school students are encouraged to study, play sports, take music lessons, are in clubs, do volunteer work, etc. Too many things. In our courses, particularly the portals, we try to cover too many things. Focus is important for learning thinking skills.

Suggestions:

1. Do more by assigning less and returning drafts more: Teach the craft of critical thinking and writing in the portal courses by concentrating on a few important assignments that are practiced over and over. A small number of writing assignments that are edited over and over might work better than many papers on multiple topics.
2. Provide exemplars of quality work: Students do not necessarily know what excellence is; they might not recognize the hallmarks of an excellent paper. They do not know the steps or elements to critical thinking.

Report from Teaching Excellence

In addressing the topic of **Textbooks** we found a variety of discipline specific definitions of what a textbook is. As a result we refer to “textbooks” as any book that is required in our courses. We found the selection, coverage, depth of use of any “textbook” was discipline and instructor specific; we didn’t find any set criterion or “rule of thumb” for “textbook” selection and use related to teaching excellence. Teaching Excellence seems a better fit under the discussion topic **best practices**, at least this is where this group spent most of the time in discussion. Teaching Excellence, we generally agreed, is linked to scholarship. Connecting theory to practice, concepts in class to problems in the “real world”, and engaging students in lifelong learning through the development of scholarship in their chosen discipline. We also recognize the balance that all faculty face between covering concepts in the “textbooks” and spending time on contemporary issues.

Two actions items emerged from this discussion that directly relate to teaching excellence and academic rigor:

1. CAPSTONE: should be linked to, and integrated into, the major.
2. There should be a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary courses and team teaching between disciplines.

We did not spend any time on the topics of **Curricula of other Universities for the same course** or **Use of Contact Time**.

We spent the remainder of discussion on **Rubrics and Writing**. The general feeling emerged from discussion that the Writing Across the Curriculum program is not working, and that many of our students need a basic, intensive writing course. This would promote teaching excellence in other courses. We also recognized that many faculty and students are unaware of the value and support that can be provided by the writing center.

Two action items emerged linked to improving academic rigor through improved writing skills of our students, allowing faculty to devote more time to teaching excellence instead of remedial writing exercises.

3. Revise the Writing Across the Curriculum program to address student needs in the Freshman year.
4. Make more students and faculty aware of what the Writing Center offers.

The remainder of discussion was off topic, but related to rigor. We generally feel that our teaching excellence is not reflected in student course evaluations. Generally, it was felt that a different metric is needed to more completely and competently evaluate teaching excellence. We discussed several ideas but left those conclusions for the other **Evaluation of Teaching** focal groups.

Report from *TEACHING EXCELLENCE* :

After hearing the concerns over retention, group felt that that was the more relevant issue to be addressed at the moment. In addition there was consensus that this topic would be better served at the end-of-the-year workshops.

However, as we began to discuss retention and the faculty role, we also began defining what excellence in teaching is.

Studies show that the major factor in retention is the student's connection with a faculty member. We recognize that once students are involved in a major there is more opportunity to meet with faculty. We need to think of ways to see that undeclared students have the same contact.

CLASS SIZE

We see perhaps a need for more creative use of large and small groupings. For example, a class of 40-50 students might meet for lecture on one or two sessions and then in smaller groups for the third. One person recounted dividing a class in half for two classes where she worked with one group on papers and the other group worked together to prepare a presentation. The next class the groups reversed roles. See the need for us to be more open-minded about teaching models even as we recognize discipline specific differences.

MENTOR

Teaching is not just standing in front of the room, it is being a mentor, a role-model and a helper to students in attaining their dreams. Time between classes might be used for conversation with students as we and they move to next classes.

We also mentioned that we felt that teaching excellence in relationship to grading meant that students should know that an A requires a high standard of performance but also that an F is equally hard to earn. We do not see ourselves in the business of failure recognizing that some students will choose to fail by their choices

DISCUSSION ON COURSE EVALUATIONS

Define purpose: promotion and Tenure?

Expert Evaluation vs. Student evaluation

- Feedback to faculty

- Not effective to measure efficacy

- Students not qualified to judge effectiveness

Do factors such as rigor affect student evaluations?

Do students penalize faculty for being rigorous?

“relativity of rigor”- can our students compete with other peers from other institutions

Incr rigor does not necessarily = bad course evals; help students learn something as they perceive it

Timing of evals: immediately at end of course or years later?

Pre/post evaluation as measure of student knowledge and teaching effectiveness

Mid-year course evaluations give by teacher to improve throughout the term

Course evaluations are not returned quickly

How seriously do the students taken them?

Will students work hard?

Teaching effectiveness: is it faculty ability to teach or is it the student's ability to learn?

How do we test critical thinking?

Report from group discussing **Grade Inflation** on 4 March 2009

Issues that surfaced:

1. How do we evaluate whether we have grade inflation at Salve?
2. If we do something to reduce grade inflation, what happens to our students when they apply for jobs or graduate school?
3. Should we assign grades at all? Should all grades be pass/fail or pass-with-distinction/pass/fail?
4. Our catalog states that 'C' is an average grade, but many students are outraged when they get one.
5. Do the grades we assign affect our course evaluations?

Suggestions

1. Seminars about graded calibration – is my 'C+' paper the same as your 'C+' paper?
2. Common rubric for grading certain multiple section classes
3. Provide grade distributions for all faculty teaching multiple section courses (e.g., in core curriculum).
4. Compare notes on how we do our grading
5. Collect data to help determine the extent of grade inflation
6. Provide grade range statistics for each department to the faculty