

Editorial

THE RATINGS RACE

Companies try to maximize their profits but universities and their departments try to maximize their prestige. Unlike the profits of a company, the prestige of a department is a non-quantitative entity: It represents the collective subjective opinion that the academic community (and to a lesser extent, the public) has of a department. It is reflected in the ratings the department receives in the various surveys sponsored by educational organizations. The existence of ratings catalyzes competition among departments for more prestige and still higher ratings. Thus the tacit goal of a department, as seen by many of its faculty, is to compete with other departments for greater prestige and higher ratings.

But unlike the competitive world of sports, the social consequences of what is done in the university are more important than how high it ends up in the ratings. Whether Kansas City wins the World Series or St. Louis does is of great importance to the followers of those teams, but since professional sports are only games played for human entertainment, the outcome has little import on society as a whole. However, the work of academe, if it is to merit and receive public support, must be more than just a game. And the goals of the department must be based on something more than a self-serving or group-serving competition for high ratings.

What should be the goals of a department or of a university? Different people have differing ideas: To the research professors, the university is a place to do research and to write papers and books; to the teachers it is a place to disseminate knowledge and to promote learning; to the students it is a place to get good grades and a degree so that their employment opportunities are enhanced; to the public it is a place to send their children for an education, to get information or advice from professors, or to enjoy entertainment in the form of sports, plays, and concerts.

More generally, the goal of the university is not profit making but service—service to society through the seeking of knowledge (research), the dissemination of knowledge (teaching and publishing), and the doing of other activities that are of value to society.

Thus, professors should be encouraged to do research *not* because they seek prestige for themselves or for the department or university, but because it is

known that knowledge—no matter how esoteric or remote it may at first seem to be—has a tendency, eventually, to be useful to society.

But the work of the university is not only research: A state university also has a responsibility to its students, to the tax-payers, and to the profession to provide a good education as well as to do research. And, one might argue, the private university has the same responsibility to its students, its financial supporters, and the profession.

Therefore, professors ought to be supported and rewarded for using part of their time teaching or working with individual students since by doing so they are helping to prepare their students to serve mankind—either in industry or as future teachers themselves.

The goal of a department, then, should be service to society and *not* the pursuit of high ratings.

How does the goal of service differ from the goal of seeking higher ratings? Let us take an example: If the goal is service the department might develop a program that is balanced with regard to teaching and research, theory and experiment, basic research and applied research, preparation for industrial employment or graduate work. But if the goal is to seek higher ratings, it might follow a narrow specialized path in which research is all that matters because it thinks this has led to high ratings in the past (and will do so in the future).

Ironically, many of the departments that *have* achieved high ratings have not sought them as a main goal. Nor have they necessarily de-emphasized teaching and service. There are a number of excellent teachers (Prausnitz, Bird) on the faculties of the leading universities as well as professors who served their profession as directors and presidents of national societies (Bill Corcoran) or served the community in various ways (Neal Pings). Those who think that academic excellence results from neglect of teaching and service may some day find that the opposite is true; that higher ratings do not come from a neglect of teaching but from a concern for it and that the raters, consciously or unconsciously, *do* take teaching into account when they mark their ballots.

Of course, good teaching is hard to define or measure, but somehow good *teachers* become known and talked about and appreciated by former students and colleagues. It is an ironic twist that a self-serving goal zealously sought after (*e.g.*, happiness, prestige) often is elusive but is attained when a higher goal of service is substituted.

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