Dirty Little Secrets in Higher Education

By Laura Palmer Noone and Craig Swenson
Can we talk? It's right there, smack-dab in the middle of the living room—that big elephant. We all see it, and though it's a nuisance, we act as if it weren't there. Why not just admit it's there? Get it out in the open and move on?

But wait, you say, why dredge up these family secrets? If we talk about them, it's the same as admitting we have problems. And if we do that, wouldn't that mean we would have to change? That would be, well, uncomfortable—and besides, we like things the way they are. Even though we complain a lot, everything is familiar this way. We're moderately happy, and we know our way around. So please just let us be!

Higher education is in many ways like a big, typically dysfunctional family—though probably a little above average on the dysfunction meter these days. This isn't particularly a surprise, considering that change creates stress and that there is no end of pressure for change these days in higher education. Societal and economic forces have called time-honored conventions into question. Parents, legislators, and business executives are all questioning the results being produced by colleges and universities. As traditional sources of funding shrink, infighting about the aims of higher education grows apace. The result? Academe's “elephants” are being put on very public display, warts and all.

People with a stake in the status quo are bound to get more than a bit testy at all the sniping. Things aren't that bad, they'll argue, and besides, there's no guarantee that what takes the place of what's being criticized will be any better. The problem, of course, is that preserving the status quo requires making lots of rationalizations. Keeping social systems going—even the good ones like higher education—requires refusing to see (or at least keeping quiet about) the “dirty little secrets” undergirding the seemingly divinely ordained conventions of higher education. Failing to talk about them—and to do something about them—may seem easier in the short term, but ultimately this failure will lead to even greater upheaval and displacement.

It seems more than a bit ironic, moreover, that so many of those who have become reactionaries against change in higher education were, in the not-so-distant past, revolutionaries in the student counterculture. One of the primary targets of that movement was the academy and its lack of relevance. Change was apparently good back then, but now these revolutionaries/reactionaries aren't so sure. With students being taught that questioning conventional wisdom is the seed of positive change, why are so many teachers in today's colleges and universities, faculty much involved in bringing about change in society's other institutions, reticent when it comes to change in their own?

In the spirit of questioning the conventional—and please excuse our impertinence—we divulge here just a few of higher education's dirty little secrets. After all, a bit of therapy can be good for the soul.

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Let there be any misunderstanding, let us make clear that we think research is a good thing. We support it, benefit from it, and think the “scholarship of discovery” to be a worthy pursuit. But let’s all be honest: some researchers make great teachers, whereas others—some of the most celebrated researchers, in fact—have no place inside a classroom (if judged by their ability to facilitate learning). The irony is that many in this second group don’t want to be in the classroom anyhow.

If a “good researcher” is defined as someone who is a critical and reflective observer, who asks good questions, who draws warranted conclusions from data, and who understands the limits of prediction, we’ll agree that the researcher does indeed have a place inside the classroom. If, on the other hand, a “good researcher” means what it usually means—that he or she is publishing formal “academic” research—that’s where we part company.

The pattern followed by most researchers leads them to learn more and more about less and less. Narrow specialization often precludes interdisciplinary breadth. The gift of so many great teachers, by contrast, rests in their breadth of knowledge—in their ability to synthesize and communicate the ideas of others and to inspire their students.
The process of getting a doctorate has never been about learning how to teach. Oh sure, most traditional doctoral programs require candidates to serve as teaching assistants, but that usually means little more than assigning them to classes. Faculty in most disciplines tend to look down their noses at those who choose education (i.e., “teaching”) as their discipline. Doctoral candidates in most disciplines primarily learn their disciplines and learn how to do research. Teaching is way down in the pecking order, and everybody knows it.

Thus, until very recently, there were few efforts to teach doctoral candidates how to teach and even fewer to teach professors how to be better teachers. And even though many institutions have now created centers to help instructors teach better—a hopeful sign—directors of those centers state that relatively small percentages of professors use these services. In addition, those who do learn teaching techniques are probably ignorant about how those techniques work. Simply put, those who do most of the teaching don’t know all that much about how their students actually learn.
The best evidence that college and university teachers know relatively little about how their students learn is that most of their courses are still taught primarily through the lecture method. Just think for a minute about how much you really remember from the lectures you've sat through in your life.

This is not to suggest that lectures are bad. Sometimes students just don't have a background in the subject, and a good lecture can help build that foundation. Stephen Brookfield, an adult-education scholar who has specialized in teaching critical thinking, once commented that students “can't think critically about nothing.” (He also suggests, however, that any lecture longer than twenty minutes is too long.)

A lecture is one appropriate way to share information, but by itself—which is how most courses are taught—it is probably the least effective way to produce student learning. An overdependence on lecture does not account for the complexity of human learning. It presents education merely as the transmission of information. It views students as passive recipients of that information—empty vessels. The job of the teacher is to, figuratively speaking, open the students’ heads and pour in the knowledge. This lets students off the hook. Professors inappropriately assume responsibility for learning by students, who often seem most happy to abdicate that role. The mantra of this pedagogy could be “just cover the material.”

If learning is the purpose of education, on the other hand, a lecture becomes only one strategy among many. Most learning theories explain learning as a process. Getting information
is a step in that process—but only one of many steps. Learning happens when someone makes meaning of his or her new knowledge through reflection, placing the knowledge in some practical or experiential context and then applying or practicing it.

Accepting the “learning as process” assumption suggests a radically different pedagogy. It argues for a teacher who, in addition to being an information transmitter, assumes the role of “manager” of the learning process. This job involves creating the right conditions for student learning. Yet given the structured bias toward research in most institutions (i.e., faculty members say that they value teaching but that the higher education structure rewards research), it seems unlikely that faculty will respond enthusiastically to being called managers of student learning. In the first place, this new role implies a lot of work. In addition, it requires a willingness to build a more varied tool set.

In 1990, Ernest Boyer, who headed the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, suggested a more expansive view of scholarship that would raise teaching and service to a level equivalent to that of research. In the subsequent decade, there has been a great deal of rhetoric about implementing his proposals, with some success. By and large, however, the structure of higher education has changed little. That structure maintains the status quo. Until it changes, learning is unlikely to get the attention it deserves.

Dirty Little Secret

Part-Time Instructors Are Just as Effective as Full-Time Faculty Members

They’ve been called “the invisible faculty”: the part-timers who do much of the teaching in higher education. They do the grunt work, teaching at times when and in places where the “real” professors won’t. They are invisible because they lack a voice. They are not involved in governance, are largely ignored, and are criticized because they lack loyalty (and we’re surprised?).

But part-timers hardly represent a homogeneous population. They teach for a variety of motives, and their ranks are composed variously of graduate students, others with academic aspirations, and professional practitioners who enjoy teaching in their spare time.

Judith Gappa and David Leslie found a widespread bias in higher education—what they called “the myth of unequal quality.” From deans to the rank and file in the full-time faculty, there is an assumption that the quality of teaching of part-time instructors is substandard.
One of the most widely used measures in higher education is the Carnegie Unit of Instruction. Ostensibly, the Carnegie Unit measures "time on task"—the amount of time that students spend with instructors. Time on task is considered a "best practice" in undergraduate education, but the dirty little secret is that student time spent on a task is not generally what the Carnegie Unit measures. What it usually
measures is the amount of time for which a course is scheduled. It doesn't measure time on task for the simple reason that attendance isn't required at most institutions. In many traditional classes, a student who shows up only for the mid-term and final exams, and hands in required assignments, won't be directly penalized.

The situation is more acute in this age of electronically mediated instruction. Here the Carnegie Unit is an obvious anachronism. This realization is at least partially behind the initiatives of accrediting bodies that now require a much greater emphasis on assessing student learning—that is, on measuring the outcome rather than the input.

But measuring outcomes is difficult, as innovators have discovered. Like the old saying about the weather, everybody talks about it, but nobody (or at least a relatively small number) does anything about it. Inputs are easy to measure, though, and so higher education clings to outdated measures like the Carnegie Unit as if they were articles of faith. That presents a problem if student learning is the goal: when we are concerned about how long a student's rear end is in a seat, we are concerned about the wrong end of the student.

**Family Therapy**

Well, there it is—the elephant in the living room has been uncloaked. There are likely a few more dirty little secrets lurking among us, but enough already. Higher education will probably never be one big happy family. We are an awfully diverse bunch, we tend to be argumentative by nature, and we seem to like it that way. Besides, nothing says that we all have to be the same—or that being the same would be a good thing. But we can learn from one another, and the good news is that there is nothing particularly earthshaking about the secrets revealed above. Higher education does not have to give up its emphasis on research, which has, after all, built in the United States and Canada the greatest research infrastructure and capability in the world. What is needed is much greater attention to student learning—how it happens, the conditions under which it occurs best, and how to measure it. Then college and university faculty must prepare themselves to manage that process.

Now, will you please move that elephant? It's blocking the television.

**Notes**