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Dodgeball, Disco, and Dreams: Reflections on Faculty Workload and Assessment at SCU’s

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Fellow faculty members, I have something urgent to say, something that will, no doubt, shock nearly every one of you who reads this article. But, again, I believe that it needs to be said, and we should no longer be polite about what we all know to be the truth. No doubt, due to the brutal nature of my message, some of you will want to turn your attention to another article. My friends in academia, we are all squirrels chasing too many nuts.

Somehow we have become involved in the management of education rather than the practice of education. And this shift forces us to ask, “Why?”—while we continually engage in a series of activities we feel involves something other than what we went into the practice of education for in the first place. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus describes the human condition in post-WWII society:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or factory, meal, streetcar four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 13

Yet, I imagine, some or all of us might wish that the work week were that simple. Where have those days of a predictable schedule gone? Because now we have so many other variables we could insert within that statement: e-mail, blackboard, affinity diagrams, work on committees, ad hoc committees and ad hoc committees formed out of ad hoc committees. If only we worked eight hours a day. If only when we returned from a vacation we did not have to travel through a virtual highway of e-mail for a day or two—and in the case of chairs, probably an entire week spent just responding to an overpopulated community of e-mailed messages. An Internet Sorcerer’s Apprentice comes to mind, lopping the broomsticks of time-saving technology only to become flooded by the necessary support system that maintains the “time-saving” technology.

And like Sisyphus on an inconstant treadmill, we continue to wonder just what are we doing and how will we get there. At times there seems to be a vacancy to our work so that we feel busy while the work seems so immaterial. Some of you might be familiar with the now classic film Office Space and the urgency of the TPS report. Only in our case, we might be asked, “Didn’t you get the affinity diagram for that course?” Meanwhile, we ask ourselves, “Why is there all this other stuff I gotta do? Can’t I just teach and do my research?”

As the chair of several committees, I’ve seen the look of dread on the faces of faculty when I’ve approached them to be a member of a committee. Have you ever changed a flat tire with one of those remarkably little, temporary doughnut spares only to discover that you have another flat tire and no spare? That “no spare,” “oh, crap”—or any other variety of swear word you might insert—moment is a look I have come to know. I imagine that my university’s Assistant Provost, Chris Crawford, is the recipient of that look on a daily basis. “Let me see,” we might ponder over our itinerary, “I can fit you in at two in the morning, next Wednesday after I grade a series of lab reports.” Faculty members express the consistent, urgent concern—over and over—about being overworked and/or having a lack of time.
to do the things they find rewarding that is discipline-related.

I find that faculty members feel as if they are living within what can be described as a dodgeball game, a tediously, hopeless dodgeball game in which organizers have purposefully stacked the odds against them. On one side of the court we have members of the administration, the student body, and the legislature, well-equipped to throw a whole series of dodgeballs at them: program assessment, concerns about grades, committee involvement, irate parents, teaching evaluations, e-mail and blackboard correspondence, and a lack of state support. Meanwhile on the other side, faculty members miserably lob poorly inflated dodgeballs or are caught in the act of just opening up the boxes during the game, and by the time they get the boxes open, the dodgeballs will be useless, out-dated, easily deflated. All the while, they are under the attack of a barrage of dodgeballs, on-campus and off-campus, real and virtual, some coming as far away as China.

Yet faculty members imagine a professional, academic arena that is quite different from this dodgeball analogy. They want an academic form of disco, a place that percolates and throbs with educational excitement: that smiling, jive-happy place of Barry White and the Bee Gee’s, “Staying Alive” playing away as a background theme song. If education were like disco then exhaustive, information-laden lectures would be as receptive as the white-man’s overbite, gleaming with exuberance and purpose. If education were like disco, then students would gleefully answer questions with John Travolta-esque arms flung straight up in the air, pointing skyward to a sparkling, busy disco-ball of knowledge. To the side, administrators and legislators spin the music that resonates with the support based on the driving beat of confidence that we will get the job done. On that dance floor, “I am somebody,” we say: a “somebody” who is part of an academic dance that spirals upward in educational achievement.

I had a defining moment this summer that made me think about these two views, and that moment of reflection happened because of my six-year-old son, Jonah. You see, Jonah and his sister, my daughter Spenser, love the Hays Aquatic Park. And I love taking them there. But due to a series of projects I needed to finish this summer I could not take them to swim for several days—which must have seemed like an eternal waiting for Santa Claus to arrive in July for Jonah. I came home one late afternoon, and Jonah asked me if we could go swimming, followed by my two-year-old daughter repeating the phrase “Swim, huh, uh? Swim?” When I told Jonah “No” because I had too much work to do, his reply was, “I'm tired of this! I'm gonna take that boss of yours and put him in time out. That's it!”—a reply in the full throes of the comical fury so expertly performed by six-year-olds—or faculty putting a tenure file together.

When I thought about this moment, I thought about two things. One, I am glad that my wife, Kristi, and I do not believe in spanking. And two, I had to admit, as I tried to explain to Jonah, that no one has made me do all the work I do. I could do less. I could get by, doing less. But I dream about what I want to be as an educator, as an academic citizen of FHSU, as someone who has something worthwhile to offer my students and my chosen discipline—whether it's playwriting or exploring the appropriation of Shakespeare in America. And I dream about the place of upper education: what it should be and what it can be. No boss has made me do what I do. In fact, at FHSU I've met remarkable and genuine encouragement from Assistant Provost Crawford, Provost Gould, and President Hammond whenever I've proposed an idea to them. Yes, I have certain obligations and duties I must attend to. It's part of the job. But I am as busy as I am because I am responsible for the work I am engaged in. If that means that at times I need to get up at three in the morning to finish my work so that I can take my children
swimming for two or three hours, then that is what I need to do as well.

Education is the field of dreams. And I use field, here, in the Bourdieu conception of a field as a site of struggle. And for me the purpose of the struggle should be creative, not counterproductive. Being innovative, imagining something other than what’s “out there,” and putting what we imagine into form underscore the fundamental practices of education. But we need to look around us. We need to think beyond our original conceptions of upper education and project some idea of what upper education will be in the future. Again, look around us. The Internet has completely changed the practice of education. And assessment embroils our culture because the social market that circulates that information continues to grow well-beyond what we imagined even ten years ago. Education always has been in the “business” of information dissemination. In the past, expertise in research, the size of libraries, access to cutting-edge faculty, all components of the availability and control of information, have justified a university’s purpose and cultural market value. But the Internet creates an information-equal playing field of academia. So why should one attend one university over another? Now, upper education has gotta prove it has the goods. Do we really educate? Or do we merely provide an information service? Ultimately, the big question: what is a university education? Kansas Board of Regents President Reginald Robinson recently expressed these urgent academic and professional concerns about our purpose for upper education.

We also must take an honest look at our culture. What is happening in and to America? Where do we see our nation going? What is happening to education? I think that we have two things, at least, to consider: the assessment factor and the service-industry mentality. Rather than treating assessment as a repellant we need to ask, “Why is assessment a significant part of education?” And I think we can look to the Wizard of Oz to explain what has happened to education and why, in part, assessment is here. Upper education in America—ever since the mid to late 60’s—has gone large-scale. That is, upper education has become an entitlement, an expectation, a necessity, especially given that the traditional forms of industrial work have transferred to other nations—Mexico and China, for two examples. So what happens to an institution when it no longer operates in the field of restricted production? What happens when financially well-off, white males are not the primary participants in upper education? There is a defining moment in The Wizard of Oz that helps to explain what happens. When the Wizard is revealed to be only a guy behind the curtain pulling the knobs, he loses the mystery that justified his position of authority. He is not the Wizard; he is just a “wizard.” What happens when education goes large-scale? A professor is just some ordinary person pulling the knobs behind the screen. It should be no surprise to us that as the availability of information increases so does the need for assessment. Who exactly is this “wizard” in the classroom? “Prove to me,” we are being told, “that he will do what he professes to do.”

We have already encountered the service-industry mentality factoring into our profession in the ways in which students want immediate access to their grades, for example. And I know that faculty—myself included—have wondered, “Why can’t they just keep track of their grades the way we did when we were in college?” When students are asked this question, they typically reply with a moment of astounded silence followed by, “But it’s my grade. And I want it.” Of course, they want it, and they expect it. We no longer live in the pre-1990’s. The students of today are, on the whole, used to having things served to them. We work, though, in a profession that nurtures, takes time to develop and prove its value, requires innovation and thought. A good education is a gestalt education: the sum is greater than the discipline-specific parts. We must address this impulse to feed (and to be fed) information rather
than teach the valuable life and professional survival skills of analysis, critical thinking, reflection, and problem-solving.

Whether addressing academic assessment, globalization, or the Internet and the information age, faculty will need to anticipate and engage in the changing educational landscape. In many ways due to information technology and the vast availability of information, we all feel as if we are beginning anew. Regardless of the level of education or academic preparedness, the students who come to state comprehensive universities have some dream in mind about their future. Are we going to genuinely help them, guide them, prepare them to pursue and accomplish their dreams? Or are we merely going to pass them through with a body of information? Dare to dream? We must dream. Dreaming forms and informs the cornerstone of our profession. “We are such stuff/As dreams are made on,” Prospero tells us near the end of one of Shakespeare’s most pedagogical of plays, The Tempest. What do we envision for the future of upper education? By taking an active role in shaping a university’s academic and educational identity, faculty members empower themselves. No one enjoys a dream imposed. That's a workload, not a dream. Is it possible that assessment can (or should) act like dreams of the future, not like the workload of today? I think so. After all, students come to us with a dream, a projected vision of their future. We tell them that we will help to get them there. How splendid when they arrive.

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