UMD LOSING FOCUS ON WHAT MADE IT SO GREAT
Yale Magrass
Chancellor Professor
Department of Sociology/Anthropology
[Published in The Torch: March 8, 2007]

Misplace Priorities

It was not too long ago that UMass-Dartmouth came closer to fulfilling the traditional ideal of a university, a community of learners and scholars, than some more highly ranked institutions. At many major research universities, teaching is hardly considered when evaluating faculty. Until recently at UMass-Dartmouth, it was the number one criterion. There are major research universities where writing textbooks for students is shunned. Books or articles written for the general public are derided as “popular” or “journalistic.” What receives the most credit are articles in recognized “peer reviewed” research journals or monographs written for specialists in the scholar’s field and unlikely to be seen, or cared about, by anyone else. Very often, other so-called experts would hardly read them and they would languish on library shelves (or now, in virtual space).

Faculty evaluation committees at UMass-Dartmouth used to be different. They would honor a wide range of publications. Perhaps, faculty should have been encouraged to write more, but they should be rewarded for acting as “public intellectuals,” people who raise new provocative ideas which stimulate debate among a wide community, including students. In a real society of scholars, faculty are supposed to be original thinkers and no two people would teach the same course, the same way.

At other universities, people who focus too much on teaching or whose writings are too “popular” are often denied tenure or even expelled from graduate school. Harvard President Larry Summers attacked distinguished African-American scholar Cornell West precisely for being a public intellectual, for appearing in the national mass media and writing books which would be displayed on the shelves at the entrance to a Barnes and Nobles, rather than focusing on articles for philosophy journals.

As a graduate student, I was warned of dire consequences if my papers were too “literary.” My advisor commented on one of my Ph.D. qualifying exams: “This appears to be really sophisticated, but it reads so smoothly that you must have oversimplified someplace; however, I can’t
tell where.” If I were not a tenured Chancellor Professor, I probably would not dare write this article. In social science graduate schools, students are encouraged to use esoteric technical jargon, use passive voice and avoid the world “I”. Convoluted sentence structure can be preferred to clear writing. They need to learn this style because it is what the research journals usually accept. This gives an air of authority, of “expertise,” special objective knowledge that ordinary people cannot question.

One of the reasons social scientists write this way is they want to establish themselves as precisely that, “scientists”, discovers of objective truth which exists independently of the observer. If they write in passive voice, they give the appearance that the paper, indeed the facts, write themselves, that any two objective scholars would write the same paper. They will say “it has been discovered” rather than “I think.” Some people refer to this as “physics envy.” To appear scientific, some researchers quantify whatever they study, appropriate or not. For the most part, they are imitating a nineteenth century, not a twentieth century, to say nothing of twenty-first century, model of physics, before relativity and quantum mechanics became the dominant paradigms.

The strength of UMass-Dartmouth used to be that faculty were not bound by rigid academic canons; “popular” writing was rewarded, teaching was encouraged, classes were relatively small and students could get to know the professors. At UMass-Amherst, classes with several hundred students, where the professor lectures several times a week and the undergraduate students meet with a graduate teaching assistant once a week, are common. Rather than relishing its niche where it can excel, UMass- Dartmouth is now trying to imitate the major research universities, against whom it probably cannot compete. Class sizes are growing. Few faculty will receive tenure unless they publish in “peer reviewed” research journals. The problem is who are the “peers?” Who gets chosen to determine if an article is deemed worthy of publication? Are they “value-neutral” upholders of objective truth? Most likely, the journals themselves reflect biases built into the assumptions of the disciplines they represent, be it sociology, literary criticism or chemistry. Any article or book, which the author does not publish himself/herself, must be reviewed by somebody. As I write this article, I am not sure it will be accepted for publication. Receiving grants has been proposed as objective evidence of the merits of somebody’s work, but granting agencies, like journals, must reflect the values, ideologies and politics of their boards and sponsors. Even the hard sciences are not exempt. For
example, the Bush administration denies funding to stem cell research, perhaps on the cutting edge of molecular biology.

Regaining respect for student input

One forum for public intellectuals can be the classroom with students as an audience, especially students who are encouraged to debate issues themselves, contribute their own ideas and grow with the instructor. In a community of public intellectuals, each teacher will have a unique perspective, but recently, administrators and academic departments at UMass-Dartmouth have been moving toward the idea that instructors should be interchangeable. If faculty are interchangeable and large lecture halls are as effective as venues where students and faculty can interact, then there is no need for a university. People should just watch the most nationally distinguished scholars on television or on the web. Already, selling taped versions of whole courses is becoming a profitable business. Various Deans and Provosts have told the Sociology/Anthropology Department if we wanted a course taught which they did not want to fund, we should hand someone a textbook and tell him/her to teach it. Textbook publishers will gladly provide instructor’s handbooks full of multiple-choice questions with the “correct” answer underlined. What does an instructor using these handbooks really need to know?

The Sociology/Anthropology/Crime & Justice Studies Department has begun dictating the content and the pedagogical approaches individual professors must adapt in their courses. Now, faculty are expected to submit course syllabi as part of their annual reviews. To have a very specific syllabus which is closely followed is being considered a measure of good teaching. I would suggest that one of our goals should be to have students involved in defining their own education. Faculty should respond to student input and interest and redirect the course accordingly. Thus, the best course may often be ones that do not follow the prescribed syllabus, but rather take advantage of the opportunity to “teach to the moment.”

There are many different models of good teaching. Some will fit one student better than another. Unfortunately, for many students the definition of a good teacher is “Someone who leaves me alone and certifies me so I can get my piece of paper.” I saw this attitude conveyed by student counselors during orientations. Students should not expect definitive answers, but instead seek deeper and subtler understandings,
which can lead to a never-ending spiral of questions. Disagreement can be as profound as agreement. Classes should enhance a student’s skills in critical thinking, building logical coherent arguments, analyzing, interpreting, recognizing bias and perspective, and conducting research. Students should be encouraged to unveil possibilities that are not intuitively obvious and even contradict the common sense understanding they previously have been taught to accept at face value, often without much reflection. Yet many students assume they are educated only when they are given an array of facts to memorize. Here is my favorite hostile student evaluation (from some years ago):

The purpose of this course was, I think, to get me to rethink everything I have ever been taught. I realized a lot, but I can’t say I learned very much.

I do not want to deny the importance of facts. In order to think critically, you must have knowledge of something to think critically about. As a sociologist, I find it extremely difficult to bring students to appreciate social change when they lack a sense of history. Social theory or political sociology is difficult to teach when most students do not know of Gandhi, or the Magna Carta. This problem is not just restricted to social science students. When I teach “Social Impact of Science and Technology,” I learn many science majors have never heard of quantum mechanics.

I propose these questions be included student course evaluations forms:

1) How did instructor respond when a student offered a comment or a question?
   a) The instructor would not let anyone or anything interfere with covering the agenda defined in the syllabus.
   b) The instructor would permit an occasional question or comment, but would not encourage them.
   c) The instructor might acknowledge the issue was interesting, but give it little attention.
   d) The instructor might spend a minute or two on the subject, but then go back to his or her planned agenda.
   e) If the issue were relevant, the instructor would discuss it with the class for as long as it was fruitful.
2) How well did the instructor seem to know the course material?
   a) The instructor seemed to know very little that was not in the assigned textbooks.
   b) The instructor may have known more than was in assigned textbooks but lacked the confidence to explore outside material.
   c) The instructor let us know that perspectives not presented in the textbooks existed but did not explore them.
   d) The instructor confidently explored ideas the textbooks did not raise and would criticize the textbook, when appropriate.
   e) The instructor was so confident in his/her knowledge that s/he looked for new ideas and learned from the students.

3) Which of these best describes the instructor’s main goal for the course?
   a) The instructor wanted us to have a notebook full of facts that we could recite back on the exams or papers.
   b) The instructor wanted us to recognize s/he was the authority. S/he was there to teach; we were there to learn.
   c) The instructor’s main concern was that we master a body of knowledge clearly defined in the syllabus.
   d) The instructor wanted to make sure the syllabus was covered, but would raise additional issues or at least permit students to do so.
   e) The instructor wanted us to appreciate debates over the issues raised in the course and develop our own point of view.

Here is an open-ended question that might also be included:

Do you think student course evaluations are worthwhile? Why or why not?