Is Teaching Ability Recognized?

Like a refrain, one hears in current discussions of academic problems remarks like the following: “These objectives can be obtained only if the teaching ability of faculty members is given as much recognition as is given to research ability.” “Teaching ability is not rewarded by our colleges as is research ability.”

If someone does not soon question the accuracy of these statements they will come to be believed through mere repetition. The first time I ever heard the validity of such assertions openly and adequately challenged was during the meeting of the American Society of Agronomy in 1942. A session was being held on teaching and its problems. A guest speaker had repeated the time-worn remark that in our colleges teaching is not rewarded as is research. In the course of the discussion which followed Dr. H. K. Hayes, of Minnesota, offered the comment that teaching ability in that field was recognized and rewarded. He added that if necessary he could present that proof.

The discussion went on. As I was a visitor, only a few of the men present were known to me personally. It was, however, evident from the remarks that many of them were men of unquestioned eminence in their field. The group evidently included a good number of heads of large departments of agronomy and a sprinkling of deans of agriculture. Finally someone asked Professor Hayes for his proof. His reply, which I quote from memory, was somewhat as follows: “I have objective proof. It is here in this room. I do not wish to embarrass anyone so I will not name individuals unless someone insists, but I see here a goodly number of individuals of recognized standing and influence in their fields whose positions rest on their recognized ability as teachers rather than as investigators.” That ended the discussion.

Of course I have no information as to the salaries received by these outstanding teachers; that seems to be the critical point, but it seems unlikely that they have been conspicuously less well paid than their fellows.

Apparently one source of the assertion so freely made that teaching ability as such is not adequately rewarded is the failure of those who make it to recognize that teaching ability may be coupled with other abilities. In other words, the mere fact that a member of a college faculty is unable or unwilling to carry out a research program does not constitute prima facie evidence of teaching ability of a high order.

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