

Getting back to basics: Research vs. teaching

Guest Column
EVAN BLYTHIN

The recent Fourth World Conference on Women, held in China, was significant in its affirmation of women's causes and in its political and geographic placement. But perhaps the most significant effect of the conference came in the ultimate debunkment of U.S. research.

It turned out that one of the presentations dealt with the dating behaviors of *Lesbians*. Holy Moly! The presentation became the focal point of attention. Was such a presentation acceptable? Were there any gritty details? Perhaps most importantly, was the presentation paid for with public dollars?

Some of the questioning was sensationalist and prurient, not worth a second thought. But much of the questioning touched serious ethical and economic concerns regarding research: Is research good? Is research affordable? These questions are significant on the national level, and they are important at UNLV. The purpose of this article is to explore these questions and how they might best be answered.

Is research good?

Two current images suggest that much of contemporary research is not good. It is not pure, and it is too common. These negative perceptions diminish the value of research.

While much lip-service is given to "pure research," it is difficult to find examples. Research is not an end in academia, it is a means to a position—to tenure, to economic reward, and to promotion. Young faculty are expected to crank out research at a machine-like rate. If that rate is not obliged, then the faculty member perishes. The research done to preserve a job has the taint of desperation.

And it's not just that new faculty have to notch their academic pistols with research notes; that research has to be published. In many academic journals the rejection rate is 95 percent. Imagine the fear that attends the illness known as "publish or perish," and then try to see that activity as "pure," as a genuine quest for knowledge. Publication tied to tenure, promotion and merit represents a goal other than knowledge.

The ulterior motives involved in contemporary research make the activity suspect. Suspicion is augmented by commonalty. Faculty are expected to publish in order to retain their positions. They are also expected to continue publishing in order to obtain merit and promotion. The result is an insane volume of published work.

I was recently at an academic convention where I saw the embodiment of the publication expectations found in higher education. A man was being given an award and honored for his academic life; he was placed in front of us as an ideal. He had published numerous books, and his resume noted page after page of articles, book reviews, chapters in books and essays, and so forth.

I found myself wondering at the value of such Herculean effort. After all, he had written more than Plato and Aristotle put together—how much thought could he have given to his work? I found myself incredulous. I also found myself wondering how much time he could have given to his students, colleagues, family and community. Did he ever contemplate the nature of his own life? Did he have a life?

There is a relationship between the impurity and the commonalty of research. What

Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev once noted about the production of tires is equally true about the production of students and research: "if you aim for a level of productivity which deprives a worker of a chance to do quality work, the product will be spoiled." (*Khrushchev Remembers*, commentary and notes by Edward Crankshaw, translated and edited by Strobe Talbot—Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970—p. 123).

I am illustrating an attitude here, trying to evoke common images. Impure and common research are

tainting the very real and compelling needs for thought, research, and the formulation of new information. This is not good.

Can we afford research?

Questioning the merit of research goes beyond ethical values and has economic overtones: Is research affordable?

UNLV represents a strong public commitment to learning and teaching, but is, like most universities and colleges in America, facing economic exigencies which cannot be avoided. The situation can be understood by looking at the economic realities of UNLV and by examining the consequences of those realities.

Higher education is expensive. At the low end of the market, the cost of a bachelor's degree is somewhere around \$75,000 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, Aug. 25, 1993). Add in the costs of room and board for four or five years for maybe another \$40,000. Then factor in the income not being made by students, at least \$12,000 a year at the established minimum wage, which adds another \$48,000 to the cost of a four-year degree. We're up to \$163,000. That's at a state university working at efficient levels, a school like UNLV.

A book can cost as much as a student. To sponsor a book, you might direct one quarter of a faculty member's time toward research and writing. If the faculty member was making \$40,000 a year, you would be paying \$30,000 for a three-year project. If the book is published, some reward needs to be given for the extra work, say \$1,000 in extra pay, for the next 20 years—another \$20,000 added to the cost of a book. And then add on the overtime costs to the authors (according to the recent work/

load study, UNLV faculty are now working overtime 24 hours a week in their research efforts)—three years of that kind of overtime, computed as a half-time job worth \$20,000 a year, and you add another \$60,000 for a book that takes three years to produce. We're up to \$110,000 for the cost of a book. Beyond that, there are the production costs which are often covered by authors and their sponsoring universi-

ties—university presses and commercial presses both have high production costs.

Higher education is expensive. Currently, the investment is

being covered by the public in the form of federal and state funding. UNLV, like most state universities, supports its system of higher education with a funding formula based on the number of students taught by a faculty member. Faculty are expected to deal with four classes of around 25 students each.

If a faculty member is given a class off for research, then other classes get larger. The more research time given to the faculty member, the larger the classes have to be. Eventually the system becomes economically impossible.

The public and students take a look at the situation, and say, "wait a minute, if the teachers are using one-fourth of their class load for research, then the students are only getting three-fourths of their fair share of faculty time." Students are facing larger and larger classes and getting less and less faculty time.

Faculty take a look at the situation and say, "I'm getting paid for one job, teaching students, but I'm being evaluated on the basis of a second job, research. I'm doing two jobs and getting paid for one."

For an institution devoted to intelligence, the university certainly fosters a bunch of losers. The public, the students and the faculty are all supporting a system that no longer works. Everyone is paying for it, and everyone is losing. As the kids say, "makes you wonder where they went to high school."

Resolving tensions

The situation demands attention. How do we make research pure and uncommonly good? How do we afford it?

We can begin by recognizing that not everyone is an Aristotle. And yes, those who can't do it, teach it—with re-

spect and veneration, with love and affection, and with rigor and diligence. Teaching, too, is an intellectual behavior and needs to be granted a rightful and honorable place in institutions of higher education. We need to reconsider the publish-or-perish syndrome so indicative of higher education in America.

We can start by eliminating artificial goals. A faculty member might be reasonably expected to demonstrate the ability to publish research and creative work, but that ability need not be the primary requisite for promotion, tenure, and merit.

Further, every research project need not be rewarded, any more than every teaching project is rewarded. Research, like teaching, should be rewarded relative to the success of the product. When a faculty member initiates a new course of learning, produces a text for the students, offers extra time to teaching activities and enhances the intellectual life of students, the faculty member should be rewarded. When a research project has been critically acclaimed, when an author's work is reprinted, when an author produces without funding—rewards should be forthcoming. Less emphasis on and more parsimony in reward for publication would lead to less externally motivated research.

The solutions have positive economic consequences: less release time and reward for research leaves more resource for teaching and service. But there are also negative consequences. Such solutions will have profound effects upon the faculty. Those changes can be predicted on the basis of a past and similar event.

Thirty years ago, hundreds of faculty came to UNLV under a set of bylaws that demanded teaching and service as primary activities. Years later, the bylaws were changed and those faculty found themselves being judged on the basis of publication. Suddenly years of teaching and service accomplishments were swept away by the fervor for publication. For the past 15 years, faculty members have been judged on the basis of their publication accomplishment. Now their research is about to be swept away by teaching obligations. Changes in the terms of employment are divisive and demoralizing.

It is not popular for a faculty member to openly discuss such intimate faculty affairs. However, our affairs are being aired in public forum. If we don't offer some advice that resolves the ethical and economic problems facing us, you can bet that public demand and changes will be made. Acknowledging that research is sometimes impure and all too common, and exerting internal changes would be good first steps in resolving real problems and negative public perceptions.

—Dr. Blythin has been a faculty member at UNLV for 26 years.

For an institution devoted to intelligence, the university certainly fosters a bunch of losers.

THE REBEL YELL

The Student Newspaper of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas

UNLV
4505 MARYLAND PARKWAY
LAS VEGAS, NV 89154-2011
PHONE (702) 895-3479
FAX (702) 895-1515

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR SHOULD BE TYPED AND FEWER THAN 300 WORDS. THEY MUST INCLUDE NAME, ADDRESS AND TELEPHONE NUMBER. WRITERS AFFILIATED WITH UNLV MUST INCLUDE CLASS AND MAJOR, OR FACULTY/STAFF POSITION. LETTERS ARE SUBJECT TO EDIT FOR LENGTH AND CLARITY.

TERESA HINDS
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ERIN NIEMEYER
NEWS EDITOR

MICHAEL MELISSA
SPORTS EDITOR

HYUN-HO HAN
PHOTO EDITOR

RICK APPIN
COPY EDITOR

KARLA KIRK
BUSINESS MANAGER

RUCHIRAWAN PHONPHONGRAT
ADVERTISING MANAGER

STEPHANIE RUSHIA
FEATURES EDITOR

S. T. SUTHERLAND
OPINION EDITOR

JAN WILLIAMS
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

MICHAEL RAY CARRIGAN
PRODUCTION MANAGER

MARY HOWELL
OFFICE MANAGER

MARY HAUSCH
FACULTY ADVISOR

The Rebel Yell

encourages students, faculty and staff to write letters to the editor. Letters should include the author's name, address and telephone number. Writers requesting their name be withheld must include their name and telephone number for verification. Letters submitted without this information will not be printed. Deadlines for submission are 10 a.m. Friday for the following Tuesday edition, and 10 a.m. Monday for the following Thursday edition.