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The Teaching Scholar: Crossing Boundaries and Making Connections

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I was pleased when Fr. Locatelli asked me to say a few words about the teaching scholar and the question of academic autonomy. This is a topic I've been interested in for some time and I'm delighted to have the opportunity to share a few thoughts.

Let me start with a reference to what seems to be the "bible" of the teaching scholar – the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. A contributor to the *Chronicle* recently argued that "academe is the most congenial profession for motivated and intelligent people who work well by themselves."¹ In the same issue another theorist insisted that our responsibility as faculty is to teach within our own disciplines and to respect disciplinary boundaries. While our students may make connections to the real world, this should not be our goal, he argued.² Just teach what you know and teach it well: maintain academic autonomy.

This notion of academic autonomy is the traditional paradigm for higher education. We should acknowledge that it has many strengths. But there are risks. When we avoid crossing boundaries and making connections, we risk creating the dystopia that T.S. Eliot described "where nothing connects to nothing."³ We risk becoming (if you'll pardon my alliteration) solipsistic scholars and parochial professors. We risk producing disjointed pieces of scholarship and a fragmented curriculum, separating ourselves into sub-sub-disciplines and leading the university to become what has been called an "academic superstore with vast collections of courses for do-it-yourselfers to try to assemble on their own."⁴

And there are deeper risks that are, so to speak, "not merely academic." There are real-world consequences in an approach to knowledge that maintains boundaries and refrains from connections. Recent headlines covering the report of the 9-11 Commission have bemoaned the glut of information gathered but not interpreted, the dotted lines left unconnected. We've heard a lot about questions that were not asked and critical inquiries that were not pursued in the Senate and in the press before our country went to war. And we've read about "failures of intelligence" in the CIA and FBI – clearly the intelligence in question is both figurative and literal.

¹ Toth, Emily, "Am I Really Stuck?" (Ms Mentor), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 23, 2004, Section C, p. 3.

² Fish, Stanley. "The Case for Academic Autonomy," *CHE* July 23, 2004, Section C, pp. 1 – 4.

³ Eliot, T.S. cited by Vartan Gregorian, "Colleges Must Reconstruct the Unity of Knowledge," *CHE*, June 4, 2004, Section B, p. 12.

⁴ Gregorian, Vartan, op. cit.

I don't think that Santa Clara University is in danger of producing fragmented and disjointed curricula, isolated scholars, students incapable of asking troubling questions, or "failures of intelligence" of any sort. In fact, I think we're at the forefront of a real paradigm shift in higher education. Our notion of the teaching scholar is central to this shift. The heart of our paradigm is a willingness to cross boundaries and make connections, intellectually, interpersonally, and ethically. In this paradigm, scholarship and teaching are frequently integrated; difficult questions are frequently asked; scholarship is not solipsistic, professors are not parochial.

Let me give you a couple of recent examples from our campus.

Our Research Committee initiated a new program a year ago in which students eligible for federal work study funds serve as research assistants for faculty, and the faculty serve as mentors, training the students, with support from Orradre and IT. It was Jane Curry's inspiration. It's called FSRAP (faculty student research assistant program). Outcomes (gotta ask about outcomes) include a group of low income students flourishing intellectually, and a group of faculty making rapid progress on important research.

I'm especially pleased with this program because it responds so well to what we've learned about ourselves from the National Survey for Student Engagement, the NSSE. Our students tell us that we're very good at challenging them academically, and at offering opportunities for internships, community based learning, and study abroad. But we're fairly mediocre, they tell us, at "student-faculty interaction." FSRAP is a small program, but it targets that issue quite directly. And it's a model for making connections and crossing boundaries.

Another example – writing groups. There are several writing groups on campus, interdisciplinary groups of faculty who meet periodically to read drafts of each other's work in progress. Some focus on external grants, others on journal articles or books. The constructive critique, the collaborative process, and the built in deadlines, they say, are invaluable. These groups have broken the paradigm of the isolated, atomistic, autonomous model of scholarship. They're creating a true Community of Scholars.

And what about teaching? Even though teaching is a public experience, there's a sense in which it's also very private. But on our campus, in some contexts, teaching is becoming more communal, collaborative or transparent. And its accompanied by a shift of figure and ground: the learning of the student becomes the dominant question, rather than the teaching of the faculty. A couple of examples:

Each quarter last year Jerry Burger turned his class into an "Open Classroom" – faculty could visit, observe, and talk with him afterwards. This year, Phil Kesten will be the "Open Classroom" professor. You don't need to be a physicist or a psychologist to visit. The Open Classroom project is about teaching and learning, not about disciplinary autonomy.

Another example: even though the structure of our curriculum doesn't make this easy, a number of faculty have offered team taught courses, linked courses, or courses with

multiple professors. Pat Hoggard and Bill Greenwalt have linked Chem I with History 11, inviting students to study the history of science and to discover, in the lab, the molecular composition of ancient Greek swords and coins. Catherine Bell has organized courses – on Religion and Violence, for example – in which each week a professor from a different department gives a public lecture and leads a discussion. And some departments are offering seminars for majors structured around the research of the departmental faculty. Each class session is devoted to the work of one faculty member: the students read an article by the professor of the week, and the professor discusses the process leading to publication.

These examples involve breaking boundaries, making connections, and inviting students to ask integrative questions. They suggest that learning doesn't require one-teacher-one-class-one-quarter-five units. This model has been lauded by some of the external reviewers who've come to campus as part of our program review. I think they're right to support this. We can do more of it.

There are lots more examples of this paradigm shift -- the community based learning programs of Arrupe, the integration of business leaders from the community into the curriculum of the Leavey School of Business, the programs offered through Environmental Studies that integrate Engineering school faculty, Arts and Sciences faculty, and RLC students. All of these involve a shift away from academic autonomy.

Of course, this is not entirely a new phenomenon – I recently unearthed an article from 1986 – 18 years ago -- in which Paul Locatelli, then our Academic Vice President, articulated three fundamental, and, at that time, radical, priorities for the university: the centrality of both research and teaching for faculty; the primacy of academics for students; and the value of interconnections in the structure of the university. The structural interconnections that he spoke of 18 years ago now flourish in the integrative work of our teaching scholars.

Clearly we're not the only university with this sort of vision.⁵ But my sense is that Santa Clara does a better job than most of avoiding the fragmentation we're often warned about in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the fragmentation that remains an occupational hazard in the academy and in the world. Very few of us are solipsistic scholars or parochial professors. In our paradigm of the teaching scholar who crosses boundaries and creates meaningful connections, we model for our students the process of working collaboratively to ask difficult questions, to weave information into knowledge, to weave knowledge into wisdom, and to weave critical thinking into ethical action.

⁵ Just one example of this paradigm at other universities: University of Pennsylvania has instituted a sabbatical program in which a faculty member spends a semester "shadowing" a faculty member from another discipline.