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Dear Colleague:

Looking back to my Berkeley student years, I consider John Leighly, Clarence Glacken, and Carl Sauer to be exceptionally good teachers. But good in strikingly different ways. Leighly was the unworldly scholar who treated his students as his peers, and this made us students work ferociously hard to merit the honor. In the classroom, he was too embarrassed to lecture at us because he assumed that we could read and learn on our own: instead, he handed out mimeographed sheets which warned us of current errors in (for instance) the derivation of equations for the Coriolis Force. Clarence Glacken gave polished lectures and handed out reading lists that provided the LC number of every book! Given the trouble he had taken, how could we in good conscience avoid the reading? Carl Sauer mumbled to the window, never provided any course outline, and yet when I consult the notes I had taken (which I still have) the logic of his arguments came through beautifully. The mumbling, rather than being a pedagogic defect, forced us to concentrate more and catch every nuance of what he had to say. But, then, what he had to say was riveting. I still remember his first lecture on "Conservation." It dwelt on the Huxley brothers--Julian and Aldous. What these two stood for became, in Sauer's hands, a capsule introduction to some of the principal themes of the course.

Well, of my three former teachers, only Glacken has any chance of winning a teaching award in Madison. Leighly and Sauer would probably lose their job. We at Madison reward good teaching, but only (it seems to me) one style of good teaching--the style that can be most easily documented. Should this trend continue, as it promises to do, we will have only one kind of good teacher. The impoverishment to education, especially at the advanced level, is horrendous. Good teaching is hard to measure, because genius is in its nature diverse--even ineffable. Why don't we therefore concentrate on weeding out bad teaching, which is easier to recognize? Signs of bad teaching include: incoherence, irregular attendance, a circus of guest lectures and movies--in short, laziness.

The trouble with concentrating on faculty who teach badly is that the many committees appointed to improve teaching will soon be out of a job. There aren't that many bad teachers on campus! Most of us faculty are Ok, even more than OK. Ask students. The complaints are rarely over teaching performance as such; they are rather over crowded classrooms, required courses that are closed, etc.

Good teaching is widespread on our campus. Perhaps three-fourths of the professors are good teachers, each in his or her own individual way. There are too many of us, which is why the market can do so little to raise our salary.

Best wishes,

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