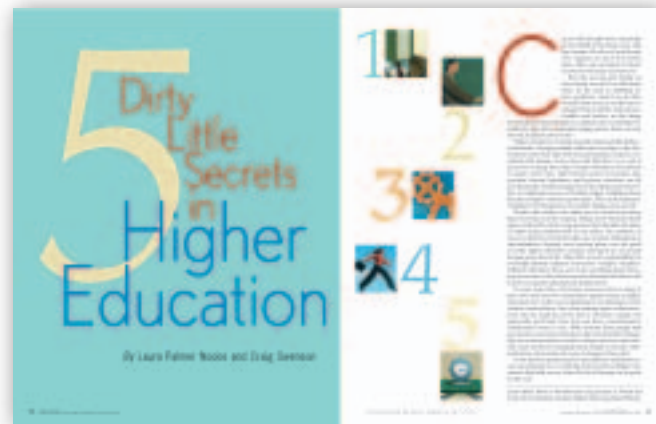


An AAUP Response to “Dirty Little Secrets”

[Editor's note: The following response letter was written on behalf of approximately seventy faculty members who attended a seminar at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) annual Summer Institute for faculty leaders held in July 2002 at San Diego State University. According to the writers, this response is the product of a “lengthy and energetic discussion.”]





To the editor of *EDUCAUSE Review*:

We write in response to the article by Laura Palmer Noone and Craig Swenson in the November/December 2001 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review*. The gossipy title of the article, “Five Dirty Little Secrets in Higher Education,” sets the tone for what is essentially a diatribe against the faculty role in higher education. The authors disavow their own interests by identifying themselves as members of the dysfunctional faculty family for which they claim concern and fellow feeling. One reality about their position is, of course, that both administer The University of Phoenix—a proprietary venture that must undermine the faculty tradition if it is to show a profit. Since the article points to the alleged self-interest of faculty, the interests of its authors deserve special scrutiny as well.

More important than considering the source, however, is the need to take the “five dirty little secrets” seriously and to

analyze their implications. In brief, the charges are (1) that research doesn’t matter in teaching, (2) that the scholarly disciplines are moribund and irrelevant, (3) that professors don’t understand the latest developments in learning theory, (4) that part-time faculty can do the job just as well as (if not better than) full-time faculty, and (5) that being present doesn’t matter if a student can pass a test in the course. As practicing faculty members, most of us can agree that the first four of these propositions are worth debating. We debate them all the time.

No one is more aware than the faculty of the deleterious effect of basing all policy, rewards, and status in the academy on the evidence of a narrow definition of *research*. But to move from that problem to a dismissal of research itself as a feature of faculty training and activity—the first “secret”—is extreme. The Noone-Swenson effort to undermine research by denying it to the broad array of faculty because it is “too academic” points to a radical misunderstanding of our dedication to discovery.

We recognize, as well, that without continually refreshing our understanding through study and reformulation of the basic ideas of our subject areas, we may fall into the trap of recirculating attitudes rather than knowledge.

We faculty also worry about the narrowness of disciplinary boundaries. But to move from that concern to equating disciplinary specialization with ignorance about anything beyond the ivory tower—"secret" number two—is also misinformed. The example of the mastery of a field not only is a major value in higher education classrooms but is one of the primary categories of approval in undergraduate course evaluations. The public schools suffered when pedagogy replaced content; a blithe dismissal of basic knowledge will simply repeat that mistake in higher education. We believe that a pedagogy empty of content is unworthy of higher education.

The third "secret"—that faculty know little about learning theory—is the recitation of a learning myth favored by a small selection of professional-education gurus. They have taken up a few bits of cognitive research to construct a simplistic epistemology that removes all agency from teachers and places it with students. In undermining the need for real, live teachers in our classrooms, some find it convenient to diminish the work of faculty and romanticize the potency of students at the same time, but the combination of insult and flattery distracts from a real concern for the difficult tasks of education. It may be witty to stereotype faculty members as purblind eggheads who have lost the ability to respond to their ardent students in meaningful ways, but such generalizations show true ignorance of real life on most real campuses. All faculty know that motivation, engagement, and relevance are keys to learning. They also know, and worry about, how to stimulate these drives in their students—especially when their classes are over-enrolled, or when the dean wants the

Now, more than ever, we need to ask what happens in education beyond the down- loading of usable techniques.

"productivity" of monster lectures, or when the students themselves are distracted. These problems are not resolved by placing students in front of a computer and letting them sink, swim, or drift. Perhaps a little secret that needs to see the light of day is how those who simplify pedagogical problems tend to overlook questions about how many students drop out, plagiarize, or waste time surfing the Net. There is little research in that area. Meanwhile, the "teaching/learning" mantra may be an excuse to take the tuition money and run.

Perhaps the most egregiously self-interested proposition in the Noone-Swenson article is its fourth "secret"—its generalization about part-time instructors' effectiveness. The smoke and mirrors behind this praise of our exploited "freeway fliers" are just clumsy enough to be spotted by the naked eye: First, distract the part-timers by flourishing gestures of solidarity with them and by blaming the full-time faculty for insularity. Then, dwell on the supposition that full-time faculty neither know nor care about what they're doing. And finally, assert that the system is just fine because some of those part-timers who don't need the jobs are happy with their lot. This is called divide and conquer, and the part-time faculty among us are too smart to participate in it.

Finally, "secret" number five—about the problems in measuring seat-time—is needlessly self-limiting. Recent commentators have remarked on a growing effort in our society to substitute information for knowledge; we have seen the results in the fragmentation of our corporate world. It is clear that individuals who pass exams for the MBA can get highly paid jobs in business; but if the careers of those CEOs who led Enron, WorldCom, or Tyco measure the success of their educations, we are in a sorry state indeed. Statistical accounting (which can be adroitly falsified, as we have seen) can hardly measure wisdom, social responsibility, and character. To reject that difficulty with the asser-

tion that we should worry only about what can be measured is to turn away from the notion of college education as a broad and deep introduction to the possibilities of learning over a lifetime. Now, more than ever, we need to ask what happens in education beyond the downloading of usable techniques, and if our answer is that something doesn't matter if we can't count it, then we are morally bankrupt indeed.

The "dirty little secrets" listed by Noone and Swenson are extremely familiar to us. We have heard these points parroted by educational entrepreneurs in our administrations, on our boards, and in the general public. Clearly, they talk to one another more than to the faculty. As practicing faculty from all fields, we assert that we are not impervious to criticism. We are constantly investigating the nature of successful education, and we know the answers will require all the intelligence, energy, and patience that we possess. To this end, we faculty will continue to respond, thoughtfully, to criticism of all kinds. We will continue to use the tools of our training (including the technology that we have invented and promulgated) and the community of our work together to frame ever more innovative and nuanced pedagogies. But our efforts cannot be helped by gross generalizations, half-baked theories, and efforts to run higher education like a business. Our aim, as academics, is to air all secrets. Whether some are dirtier than others, however, may depend on the eye of the beholder.

Signed,

Mary Burgan, General Secretary
American Association of University
Professors

and

Susan Meisenhelder, President
California Faculty Association

For

The Part-Time and Full-Time Faculty at
The AAUP Summer Institute
San Diego State University
San Diego, California
July 21, 2002