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Thoughts on Academic Quality

In this edition of the *Faculty Forum*, a number of our colleagues present mini-essays on the topic of Academic Quality. During the last year we have had many conversations about the future of the University, most of them informal among faculty and staff, some of them formal as in the Chancellor search process. There is a general understanding that DU seeks to move forward academically. While, Chancellor Coombe's remarks at Convocation and in the recent, winter edition of the *DU Magazine* give us ideas about his vision, much work is yet to be done in our community to find and choose the best paths to the future.

As the Executive Committee discussed these issues, we hoped for a broader campus-wide discussion. As one contribution toward that end, we invited many faculty members to submit mini-essays on the topic. As you will see, this initial installment addresses the questions of Academic Quality in some diverse ways. We hope these offerings will stimulate your thought and action. We invite you to read, to think, to talk with others, and to respond. So, if you wish to put your thoughts into words, or to agree or debate thoughts in this issue, please send us your mini-essay! We can put out as many *Faculty Forums* as we want on this topic, and would greatly enjoy some active, scholarly discussion and debate.

As I write this, I have just left the second meeting of the Research, Scholarship and Creative Work Task Force. The Task Force is committed to doing its work in the context of maximum faculty and administrative input. You will hear more of this in the near future. I hope that our *Faculty Forums* this winter and spring will contribute in a small way to our shared thinking and envisioning as an academic community.

Cathryn Potter
President, Faculty Senate

From Jere Surber, Philosophy

Ask a philosopher about the meaning of "academic" and the first line of response will be pretty predictable. The term derives from the name of a group of like-minded thinkers, called "the Academy," originally gathered around Plato, the founder of philosophy as it has been understood in the European tradition. Some accounts also add that it served as a vehicle for the oral dissemination of certain "esoteric" doctrines not included in the "exoteric" Platonic dialogues. This may account for a certain ambiguity of connotation in the meaning of the term: on the one hand, learning pursued at the highest level; on the other, the exclusivity of the "ivory tower" (as in, "That point is purely academic").

Whichever way the term's meaning might tilt, it is certain that the central focus of the Academy was philosophy, the "love (or at least pursuit) of wisdom." (This is no doubt connected with the fact that the terminal academic degree in most disciplines is still the "Doctor of Philosophy.") As virtually all Hellenic thinkers made clear, "wisdom" involved a dynamic combination of knowledge of what is true, understanding the broader principles underlying why and how the truth can be known, and sound judgment in relating the two and applying them to one's own experience and life.

I think that this characterization can still serve as an effective starting-point for understanding "academics" today. Certainly most disciplines involve a certain amount of learning and teaching the basic content and skills of their respective areas of inquiry. But they also involve developing a broader understanding of what makes each distinctive, how each constitutes a different way of pursuing and presenting what is true, and how each relates to others as well as to fundamental human concerns.

One important result of such an understanding of the meaning of "academics" is that it involves a considerable region of the "intangible," of that which escapes precise

definition or reliable evaluation. Certainly assessing the teaching and learning of specific content or skills presents only minor problems. More difficult is assessing (often under the far too narrow rubric of “critical thinking”) the understanding and application of the fundamental principles and procedures of the various disciplines. Most problematic, if not impossible, is determining the effects of the first two on the experience and life of learners. This is the sort of thing that is only registered, a decade or more into post-academic life, when a student returns and tells us, “Your class really made a difference for me.” It is not the sort of “data” that will ever find its way into any teaching evaluation (or into any office of assessment) and yet it is, finally, the only thing that counts.

From Corinne Lengsfeld, Engineering

After considerable thought on the subject I am left with the simple concept that in science and engineering, excellence is clearly achieved when the work of the individual is recognized by people both inside and outside their discipline as an important contribution. For people late in their career, the continued ability to obtain excellence is easily measured by the types of honors bestowed upon them. For example, the highest level of continued excellence is signified by admission to the National Academies of Science and/or Engineering. Early in a faculty member’s career or during a transition, impact is not so easily apparent. Excellence can still be observed, however, when looking at the number of times a paper has been referenced by others or what journals they publish in. For the latter, papers published in main stream venues like, *Science* or *Nature*, signify amazing work limited only to the exceptional.

Papers of excellence are frequently found in other journals and can be recognized by the frequency of citation. If a paper is only referenced a handful of times over a handful of years, they or their students are the only ones who believe it has value. Whereas papers referenced with high frequency even within a single year clearly demonstrate a number of people have utilized this work to advance their own contributions and thus represents extraordinary work.

I believe at least two faculty members in my department could be admitted to the National Academies of Science/Engineering, and fighting for these honors would dramatically change the funding landscape for them and our younger faculty. But we don’t fight for each other to get these kinds of affirmations on excellence (nor the administration); instead we tend to beat each other down.

From Don Bacon, Marketing

An organization that demonstrates academic quality sets clear learning goals, creates detailed plans for achieving those goals, and implements programs to achieve those goals. The organization collects information about how well

students achieve those goals and uses this information as the basis for improving the entire system. To achieve academic quality, an organization must have a long-term commitment to education from the highest levels of the organization, and the faculty must be intent on continuously learning about effective educational practices. Further, faculty must coordinate their individual efforts over long periods of time to achieve complex learning outcomes. (This definition was adapted from Deming and Juran’s teachings about Total Quality Management.)

From Kathy Green, Education

Academic quality ratings are computed by standardizing and summing scores on the variables faculty research productivity and grant funding, program characteristics, student standardized test scores, and institutional resources. *The U.S. News and World Report* quality rankings also likely include an effect of the institution as a whole. Missing from the summation of measures of institutional quality are process-related and student outcome-related, such as instructional quality, student learning, success of graduates, time taken to get a degree, proportion of all-but-dissertation students, and faculty and institutional service to the community.

If I defined academic quality, I’d certainly include measures of quality of the learning environment and student outcomes, not just entering test scores. Academic quality would reflect what students learn and do with their learning in addition to faculty research productivity. I’d also want to diversify rankings to reflect which programs provide the best clinical training, the best research training, have the most impact on the academic field, or on the surrounding or distant community. Which programs emphasize entrepreneurship, innovation, ethics, state and national policy? There’s also a question of which programs do a better job of taking lower-scoring students and “adding value.” Which programs seem to work better for which gender, culture, age, or special needs groups? Statistics on student academic success would help me advise my hearing-impaired, math whiz god daughter whether to apply to Gallaudet, MIT, or stay close to home and go to UC-Davis.

If I think of quality in terms of cars, Mercedes might be a high quality car in terms of an overall ranking but very low quality in terms of meeting my needs. I want information about miles per gallon, repair records, safety ratings, four-wheel drive availability, cost, etc. For academic programs, I want information about what the faculty are doing, how well the institution supports faculty and students, what students look like academically when they graduate, what kinds of jobs they get and what impact they have, and how likely it is that a student finishes the program. I also want information I will not get, at least not in print, about how friendly the program is to hearing-impaired students. So, quality judgments involve decisions about for what and for whom. I want all the data, so I can judge quality based on the specific outcomes I want.

In my area of research methods, measurement, and statistics in education, better academic quality for the program would to me involve a broader range of teaching and research opportunities for students during their time at DU. I want students to get a box set of experiences and then some tailored to their personal background and aspirations. This does not mean signing up for more courses, but having more formal and informal opportunities to be immersed in the field—from conference attendance to conversations with colleagues, helping out with a research project to signing on as the grant’s statistician. The goal is to have a place, time, and culture for students, and faculty, to reflect on important and interesting academic problems.

From Nancy Allen, Peggy Keeran, Michael Levine-Clark, and Betty Meagher, Penrose Library

Academic quality is not achieved instantaneously. It doesn’t happen at “Google-speed.” No matter how you define academic quality, or which aspects of quality on which you choose to focus, you must regard academic quality as a set of characteristics that take time and effort to produce. Academic quality has to do with people and the knowledge that people create, use, manage, and teach. Those pursuing academic quality need to find and enter into ongoing conversations with others within their fields, to become part of the scholarly community and to contribute knowledgeably to it. Libraries, through collections and services, provide access to those conversations. Libraries manage access to scholarship, and they teach access to the wealth of written and visual evidence of scholarly communities. This is necessary for quality academic research, creativity, and writing, and the library helps those within the university (as well as the general public) to find and respond to the conversations within the disciplines.

The library’s collections represent an important resource through which the faculty and students can discover materials which both embody and lead to academic quality. Although these collections are never perfect and can always be improved, they have been developed through partnerships that include librarians and individuals from many disciplines. Academic publications result from research and discovery, and are a reflection of quality research. They also help generate new knowledge, serving as catalysts for further research. Finally, the library collections fulfill the curiosity of generations of learners moving through the University community over time, whether the desired materials are in paper, on film, or in digital form. The role of technology is critical to a library’s quality of service, but it does not drive the quality agenda.

What else does the library contribute to academic quality besides its collections? This question leads us back to the people engaged in the generation of academic quality. The library is in part defined by its collections, and those both support and reflect academic quality. The library is also defined by its faculty and staff. The library faculty is

dedicated to supporting the process of creating knowledge, recording knowledge, and managing information resources describing knowledge. They work to advance the exchange of knowledge between faculty and students, among students, and between generations of learners affiliated with the University. The library faculty helps teach the research and writing process that is essential to academic quality.

Academic quality is not only reflected in the lab, and in the classroom, but in many other small moments in time and place. The library is a learning place, a place for pursuing academic quality. In a library, students and faculty are both physically and intellectually part of larger communities, including both this university and the academic world at large. Picture a doctoral student tracking down a foreign language dissertation through the library’s Loans Department. Picture a first-year student in the farthest, quietest row of the stacks, sitting on the floor, surrounded by 19th-century publications. Picture three students arguing in a group study room in the library, each with a different version of a presentation, each making the case for their joint project. Picture a faculty member with her laptop in a library study carrel, cell phone turned off, wireless network turned on, at the beginning of the sabbatical. Picture a digital media student leaning over the shoulder of an anthropology student, advising on ways to incorporate images from a California digital archive into a paper.

Picture not only the library building, or its collections, or the library faculty and staff, but picture all the ways that a library can change lives, serve as a place for learning, and help empower everyone in the DU community to live the life of academic quality.

From Miles Brennan, ERI, Biology, Honors Program

I teach in both the Biology Department and the Honors Program. In my experience, academic quality encompasses two related endeavors: to transmit knowledge and to generate new knowledge, new understanding. These are the past and future of our intellectual present. We can not properly understand past achievements (acquired knowledge) except as the “new understanding” of a previous time. While it is relatively straightforward, and undeniably important, to measure our success in transmitting knowledge to our students, it is equally important to give them the experience of intellectual inquiry which is the wellspring of this knowledge. Intellectual inquiry is problematic, having no defined endpoints and, as a creative endeavor, no defined rules whose mastery can be tested; nonetheless, it is at least as important as transmitting content to academic quality.

Involving students in the creative intellectual work of the University seems to me the best way to give students experience in intellectual inquiry. In the Biology Department, this means providing research opportunities to as many students as possible. In the Biology Department,

the PINS program has been essential in providing funds to support undergraduate research; continued support and expansion of the PINS program would benefit the academic quality of the University. Further, emphasis on understanding the creativity of the past, will prepare students for their own creative work.

In the past year, two offerings by the Honors Program seem to be important contributions to academic quality. First, the Honors Seminar, “Art and Incompleteness” brought together faculty from disparate disciplines to present and discuss the ideas in “Gödel, Escher, and Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid.” It was a rare and exhilarating experience for undergraduates to participate in discussions engaging faculty from Music, Computer Science, Philosophy, Mathematics, and Biology. Second, an Interdisciplinary Seminar started under the auspices of the Honors Program and supported by the Office of Graduate Studies and Research, has provided a venue for faculty and advanced students to discuss texts transcending disciplinary boundaries. Already the texts discussed include *Consilience* by E.O. Wilson, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister’s Fox* by Stephen J. Gould, and *The Norms of Nature* by Paul Davies; in the present term, we will begin with *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* by Ludwick Fleck.

In summary, I think that in addition to the emphasis of transmitting knowledge (and assessing our success at transmitting knowledge), DU needs to support efforts to expose and engage undergraduate students to intellectual inquiry.

From Nick Cutforth, Education

In his 2002 ASHE Presidential Address, William Tierney warns academics about the danger of being “academic Pontius Pilates, washing our collective hands of responsibility, rather than dirtying them with the hard work of engagement with the public, and especially the schools” (2003, p. 4). If we are to heed Tierney, academic enterprise should focus more on the significance of community engagement (e.g., service-learning and community-based research) to an urban university, to the community, and to student learning. Matching the expertise of faculty and staff and the enthusiasm and time of students with community needs is exciting and holds immense potential for creating a more just and cohesive society. From DU’s perspective, a commitment to community engagement would position the academic mission of the institution with the aspirations of the city and region. When coursework includes experiences that require the development and application of knowledge to address pressing social issues, universities are fulfilling their moral responsibility to address the complex, varied, and interconnected challenges of their surrounding communities, as well as their public mandate to serve some larger public purpose as a citizen within a civil society. An institutional commitment to community engagement would place larger questions of social, political, and moral purpose

– and specifically those people who are disadvantaged by social, political, and/or economic structures – at the center of DU’s scholarship, teaching, and service.

Students in the College of Education are increasingly being exposed to academically rigorous community engagement activities in classes and independent research opportunities, and alongside professors. The benefits of this exposure reflect the findings of researchers such as Eyler and Giles (1999) and Strand et al., (2003). Our students benefit from hands-on, real world, sustained, problem-solving experiences. They gain a sense of community, a sense of responsibility to others, sensitivity and aspirations to help resolve social problems, a feeling of commitment and obligation to become involved in community affairs, as well as a commitment to broader concerns for society. Their community-based experiences also enhance disciplinary knowledge while serving as a catalyst for consideration of the structural issues surrounding their placement, various dimensions of civic life, and particularly their own interests and responsibilities as public citizens.

In his acceptance speech last year, Bob Coombe stated, “We will be more than the University of Denver – we will be Denver’s University.” This bold vision will involve institutionalizing community engagement to make the intellectual and programmatic resources of the university more available and more useful to schools, families, and organizations. At DU we have the time and expertise to bring together our resources with those of the community to address critical issues such as education, housing and health; business and community development; workforce preparation; race relations; and urban growth. Greater utilization of these resources will enhance the community’s capability to develop common solutions to complex problems.

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From Bruce Uhrmacher, Education

Thank you for inviting me to share a few words about issues pertaining to “academic quality,” “academic reputation,” and “the academic enterprise.” As I thought about these terms I realized that I had a few ways to venture. I could

discuss the way these ideas are embedded in a set of variables that require negotiation and compromise in terms of their implications. For example, in order to meet student projections, a department may admit students of questionable academic talent. Once in the program, however, what obligation does the department have to help these students succeed? In this scenario, “the academic enterprise” raises interesting questions about “academics toward what end?” Is academia for the end of student development assisting society, or for the growth of disciplinary knowledge? The answer is probably some combination of these.

As intriguing as I find the above, I’ve decided to focus on a different point, one that addresses issues of theory and practice. In short, I believe that a university needs to address both. In doing so, the university expands its notions of “academia,” and increases its vitality and overall purpose. My line of reasoning is as follows:

1) The Theoretic

Theoretic knowledge is useful for solving problems about ideas of the mind. Theoretical problems stem from subject matter that we already know (the literature). Methods used to solve theoretic problems have traditionally been defined by a principle (the scientific method), which determines the shape of the problem (an experiment), the kind of data to seek, and even the kinds of interpretations that seem appropriate. The end of the theoretic is a general statement, an abstraction that is supposed to be true. In other words, *warranted assertions* are intended to be durable and universal. From this point of view, the academic enterprise is largely science-based and academic quality relates to methodological rigor. The academic reputation of the institution depends on the results of the methodological enterprise and the training of individuals to fit it. Often when we think of academics, we (various scholars and laypersons) have a theoretic conception. In general, universities are good at achieving this agenda.

2) The Practical

Practical problems, said Aristotle, arise in the world of action. When we devise plans, carry out actions and make decisions, we are involved in practical knowledge. The practical finds its problems in a state of affairs that can be solved by trying to change it. There is no method *per se* to solve a practical problem. The subject matter is concrete and particular. The end of the practical is a decision to be used as a guide to action.

For example, when a principal has to decide whether to expel a student, honor a parent’s desire to include or exclude a particular book in the curriculum, or move a student from one classroom to another, she is engaged in practical matters. She may draw on theory to help her decide what to do, but ultimately there is no particular method to follow or necessary conclusion to reach. Resolving these kinds of issues require practical thinking and understanding. From

this standpoint, the academic enterprise is intertwined with practical issues facing communities and the individuals they contain. Academic quality would relate to the breadth and depth of practical decisions made, and academic reputation would rest on the wisdom of practical decisions and the training of students to be able to make them. Universities seem less adept at addressing these kinds of issues.

American universities have always had a number of aims. If we agree that there are at least two different types of knowledge, each with its own ends and means, and if we agree that both may be subsumed under the notion of academia (“Of or belonging to an academy or institution for higher learning; hence, collegiate, scholarly” (Oxford English Dictionary)), then it seems to me that we need to think of “academic quality,” “academic reputation,” and “the academic enterprise” in terms of both theory and practice. As I indicated at the outset, in doing so, the university expands its notions of “academia,” increases its vitality, and fulfills practical and theoretical ends.

From Eleanor McNeese, English

The following eight points are offered as indicators of academic quality in the discipline of English:

- 1) Well-written papers that are both cogently argued and grammatically correct. Seminar and other class papers should follow MLA style and be properly documented.
 - 2) Critical thinking as reflected in thoughtful discussions of literature and in papers.
 - 3) Ability to see both sides of an argument/question and assess opposing views fairly.
 - 4) Ability to bring historical, cultural and theoretical contexts to discussions in class and in written work.
 - 5) A sound knowledge of the genre(s) in which one writes (creative writing).
 - 6) Ideally a knowledge of a second language and an ability to read literature in that language (especially at graduate level).
 - 7) On the scholarly side: a combination of vision and precision (attention to detail) in writing—both creative and critical.
 - 8) An ethical commitment to literature and a desire to communicate that commitment to peers and friends.
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From Christina Coughlan, Biology

When I hear these terms my biologically wired brain immediately goes to thoughts of the research performed at DU. I think about the time I personally spend connecting/collaborating/tying together the work done in my lab with that done in the labs around. I think about the great scientific discussions I have with the other scientists hypothesizing on how the cell may perform one function or another and drawing models around such scenarios.

Having attended many conferences and received the “shock response” when I even hinted that we may do research at DU, I came away thinking that maybe we are not held in high enough esteem or viewed with quite the amount of prestige that my little academic bubble affords me to believe. I would love and hope to see this change. I think in the Biological/Medical science world the way to build our academic reputation is to publish in high tier journals, in this way making us equal contributors to the field of science regardless of our institution. This also in turn enhances and brings into light the reputation of DU as an environment that nurtures great collaborations and is on a par in hot areas of research. Presenting talks, posters, interacting with other scientists, setting up collaborations at scientific meetings, this is all academia to me. This is what made me want to be a professor and not a bench scientist in a Pharmaceutical company. I wanted freedom of thought, freedom to work on what I thought was hot. Feelings of pride and happiness in being professors are what the students see. The more they see of this in us, the more they may want this life for themselves.

Being able to discuss my research, establishing collaborations with other scientists, discussing the research that would fill that gap in the Alzheimer’s field—all of these experiences when relayed to the inquisitive student mind allows me to bring an academic quality to the classroom that the students benefit from and become excited about. I have noticed that my best discussions and interactions with the students are when I tell them, “we don’t know how that works in the cell but that is what my research and that of others is trying to decipher.” This has always resulted in many interested, excited students making their way to ask questions after class about my opinion as to what I hypothesize is happening and whether or not they can get some experience doing research in the lab. This warms the cockles of my heart, and I would love to have the brain space to do more of it. It makes me feel academic, happy, proud, excited about coming to the lab/office/classroom and that to me is what this academic career is all about. I hope DU can make everyone feel this happy.

From Dean Saitta, Anthropology

When I think of academic quality I think of teaching, research, university service, and community outreach—all aspects of scholarship, in the Boyerian sense—that makes

“beautiful connections” between the varied phenomena that attract inquiry within the great domains of human knowledge (I thank Julanna Gilbert for the “beautiful” riff, acquired in a recent conversation about interdisciplinary teaching). Academic quality depends upon professors having up-to-date understandings of disciplinary knowledge and a grasp of the social causes and consequences of thought. Academic quality is fundamentally integrative, entailing an awareness that most of the really interesting action in intellectual life occurs in the interstices or borderlands between established disciplines and knowledge domains.

Academic quality means teaching that’s informed by original research, since you can’t have excellence of either without doing both. It’s about actively involving students in these pursuits, but not essentializing their participation. Academic quality means sticking to first principles, and not necessarily what the industry defines as best practices. It’s about building upon and extending academic strengths, and resisting the urge to ambulance-chase in search of new market niche. But academic quality also means living up to Harold Bloom’s notion of the university as an adversarial and unpopular institution. It’s about sustaining a commitment to experimentation and risk-taking in the classroom and in academic programming, even if such efforts seem to contradict currently-accepted societal and/or industrial standards of budgetary efficiency, practical reason, and good taste.

Finally—and in keeping with my particular anthropological sensibilities—academic quality means being responsive to knowledge produced by other cultures, both ancient and subaltern. It contextualizes and evaluates our knowledge by continually weaving and reweaving it with the knowledge of others so as to enlarge, in the words of Richard Rorty, “the scope of us.” Such contributions to academic quality—multiculturalism without the identity politics—create opportunities for critically reflecting on human conditions both past and present, and for imagining new possibilities for the future. Thus, academic quality in its many forms cultivates and promotes views of life that not only explain, but also emancipate.

From Kim Axline, Theatre

“Academic quality and enterprise” in the Theatre Arts—and, to my mind, throughout the Fine Arts disciplines—requires the meaningful integration of theory and practice, principle and innovation, culminating in works that engage and/or challenge not only the creator(s), but also their colleagues, teachers, and the community at large. It is not enough to assiduously study the history or various forms of the discipline; nor is it sufficient to trust one’s own subjective inspiration and artistic impulses. To truly excel as a student of the performing arts, one must consistently and conscientiously mingle the practical and the passionate, discovering how academics and artistry reinforce—rather

than reify—each other in the classroom and on the public stage.

In the study of Theatre, we dream of pupils who embody these often polarized fields and modes of inquiry. Ideally, each actor, director, designer, technician, playwright, dramaturge or stage manager is a little bit of Oscar Brockett (the field's most distinguished historian), and a little bit of Ariane Mnouchkine (one of the world's most eclectic and dynamic ensemble directors). A *chiasmus* is needed in which the “study of art” and the “art of study” are inseparable; wherein grappling with dense contemporary theory or innovations in design technology open the doors of perception and possibility in live performance. Only when a student is equally versed in what theatre *has* meant throughout the ages (*vis-à-vis* history, literature, theory) and what theatre *can* mean in those to come (*vis-à-vis* acting, design, directing) are they truly capable of resurrecting a dusty canonical relic or creating afresh an original interpretive work of art.

Of course, the balance can often be skewed in a modern, pre-professional world in favor of one or the other: academics or artistry. But in my years of education, teaching and performing, the most daring and successful artists are those who have also been students of their art, those who care passionately for its manifold branches and secrets. If DU is to continue to excel in this field, and to inspire “academic quality and enterprise” in our students, then it must be along these complimentary and conterminous paths. Deferring to the wisdom of the Delphic Oracle we once again clamor, “know thyself!” For a student to be a true artist at DU or in the world at large, (s)he must study her chosen art in depth and with passion, tracing its varied branches with equal measures of scholastic exactitude and artistic ingenuity. “Study what you most affect” (*Taming of the Shrew* 1.1.40).

From Todd Breyfogle, Honors Program

I take as my starting point for thinking about academic quality the intellectual development of the undergraduate student in a transdisciplinary context. A life of liberal learning entails a confrontation with excellence which enlarges our humanity even as it humbles our pride. Whatever the subject matter or pedagogical method, academic quality requires the cultivation of a collective atmosphere in which the demands of intellectual precision and discipline—in research, teaching, and learning—are held to be paramount.

A *universitas* worthy of the name is a place where everyone, in the words of literary critic George Steiner, “is brought into personal contact with, is made vulnerable to, the aura and the threat of the first-class.” These encounters with excellence—in intellectual and physical form—are collisions which both terrify us (“excellence bullies” says

Steiner) and inspire wonder: “the student will forget neither their luminosity nor their menace to complacency.” An institution teeming with first-rate minds thus takes on the double part of terror and wonder as conditions of passionate inspiration and study.

Steiner describes this confrontation with excellence using the language of “the classic,” language which can be extended to natural phenomena as well as artifacts of human culture. Steiner writes: “I define a ‘classic’ in literature, in music, in the arts, in philosophic argument, as a signifying form which ‘reads’ us. It reads us more than we read (listen to, perceive) it.” The classic questions, dislocates the comfortable mental world we inhabit in such a way as to be “unsettling, even painful.” We do not open the classic; the classic opens us—if we set aside our arrogance and entertain the possibility of being transformed by nature or sublime human achievement. “Both thought (knowledge, Wissenschaft, imagination given form) and love ask too much of us,” Steiner writes. “They humble us.”

Academic quality entails further an impatience with mediocrity as an offense to the possibilities of human and natural excellence. This mediocrity may be the product of an ideology, of the pressures of the market (what is “useful” or “profitable”), of bureaucratic convenience, of a failure of imagination, or of sheer laziness. Whatever its origin, mediocrity is a refusal to confront that which, in Spinoza’s words, is “difficult because it is excellent.” Administrators, faculty and students must demand of each other the courage to confront that which is “difficult because it is excellent.” A place where this mutual expectation is diminished cannot sustain academic quality. We are privileged to be custodians of traditions which constitute the highest human achievements; we cannot negotiate our confrontation with excellence as both the form and condition of a genuinely intellectual life.

From Cathryn Potter, Social Work

In the past year, the DU community has engaged in many conversations about academic quality, about the directions the University may choose, and about the strategic activities that will get us there. Our new Chancellor is actively engaged in articulating the need for a focus on academic quality, and those of us involved in the Senate have had opportunities to join the conversation with colleagues across division lines. In my home division, social work, we have recently hired six new faculty members, and have re-vamped our promotion and tenure policies and procedures. Both of those activities have prompted us to think and talk together about our vision for academic quality. Here I present a few of my thoughts, with the important caveat that they “do not necessarily represent the opinions” of the social work faculty as a whole!

Social Work is an *applied* discipline, or, as one DU liberal arts colleague once opined, in Latin, a “servile” discipline. Social work scholars are very much oriented to knowledge

that serves individuals, families and groups, neighborhoods and communities, and societies. Social work is a *professional* discipline. We are very much committed to the quality of the professionals we graduate. Social work is an *integrative* discipline, seeking both to develop its own knowledge base as well as use and contribute to the many allied social sciences with whom we collaborate. Social work scholars seek to make a difference, so we place emphasis on the social utility of our work. Given this propensity to actually do things that affect people, social work scholars and social work professionals must be held to a high quality standard for our scholarship and for our teaching. That is, we may be more potentially dangerous scholars than your average poet (with apologies to Bill Zaranka).

This is certainly true in my primary research area, child maltreatment. Every day child welfare workers (many without any professional social work training) make decisions about child safety, about the credibility of evidence and its meaning, about what to do with families whose abilities to care for children are severely impaired. Yet, in the child welfare field, very much remains unknown about the most effective strategies and interventions. This is an area of practice where replacing evidence with personal bias poses some very difficult ethical and legal challenges. Research is difficult in these applied settings; nevertheless social work must commit to these complex intervention studies.

We must also commit to an evidence-based approach to our teaching. A child welfare social worker deserves to be grounded in the knowledge of what works – not simply what individual professors wish to teach, or what fads may be sweeping the child welfare landscape at the time they were educated. Our challenge in child welfare research is to remain focused on the effectiveness gaps in the literature, and our challenge in education is to help students understand and use evidence to make judgments in the field.

So what does this mean for academic quality here in our social work program? It means that our faculty must be active researchers, respected scholars, intelligent consumers of research and connected to teaching in our educational programs and in the larger human services community. We must be leaders in our research areas and able to effectively translate findings into practice guidelines. We cannot afford to dichotomize research and teaching, not in our own minds and especially in the minds of our students.

We also cannot afford to graduate professionals whose competencies are not of a very high quality. Social workers make decisions with life and death ramifications. Our admissions standards must be very high, and our graduation standards even higher. For a private, tuition-driven program, the ability to attract strong students in our MSW and Ph.D. programs is directly tied to the national reputations of our faculty, and the quality of the curricula we teach. We must also commit to graduating students who represent the many diverse communities in which social

workers live and work, and this means our program must be affordable.

These then are the elements that comprise academic quality for social work, in my view:

- A top-notch, nationally known, highly productive faculty who are excited about their scholarship, and actively infusing their findings into their classrooms.
- An academic community of diverse scholars and students.
- A rigorous, highly relevant curriculum that is strongly evidence-based.
- A cadre of bright, committed students who enter with the capacity for complex thought and who exit with complex frameworks to guide decision-making.

In social work, we count ourselves lucky to be here at DU during this transition time. Chancellor Coombe was recently quoted in the *DU Magazine* (winter, 2005) as saying:

DU will lead the nation in developing innovative and effective new approaches to teaching and learning and will sustain a bubbling, percolating scholarship and research enterprise that is *focused on real outcomes for real people*. We will graduate extraordinary men and women who care about people, live their lives with integrity and are *committed to making a difference for society*. ... DU also will aggressively build *productive relationships with businesses and non-profits, as well as the federal and state governments*, in a manner that can *have direct economic and social impacts for people*. And, we will make an institutional commitment to the people of the city and the state that have given us so much of our identity. (Coombe, 2005, emphasis added)

If we are to live up to this vision, our social work faculty must commit to the level of scholarship and curriculum development needed to do this work effectively.

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