

Thoughts on Academic Quality

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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 Allan 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.