

Academics urge universities to change culture to value teaching as highly as research

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The reward systems at universities heavily favor science, math and engineering research at the expense of teaching, which can and must change. That's the conclusion of UC Irvine biology professor Diane K. O'Dowd and research professors at Harvard University, Yale University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and elsewhere.

Writing in the Jan. 14 issue of *Science* magazine, the authors note that professors have two responsibilities: to generate new knowledge and to educate students. But, they maintain, "although education and lifelong learning skills are of utmost importance," the promotions, awards and recognition given to science professors all emphasize research, while educating students "often carries the derogatory label 'teaching load.'"

"The problem is the culture of the [university](#), which values research over everything else in the reward and promotion system," said O'Dowd, a developmental & cell biology professor, who wrote the commentary with Richard Losick, a molecular & cellular biology professor at Harvard, with input from 11 others.

The authors are trying to practice what they preach and have been rewarded for it. They're all research scientists who have received substantial funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to create new programs that more effectively engage students in learning science.

"We're excited that these accomplished leaders have drawn on their experiences to take on this critically important challenge," said David Asai, director of HHMI's precollege and undergraduate education programs.

The *Science* piece outlines steps to "help transform our research universities" so that [teaching](#) and research are equally valued. The recommendations include training science faculty in best teaching practices; requiring teaching excellence for tenure and other promotions; creating peer discussion groups and cross-disciplinary programs that connect science faculty with education faculty; winning over department chairs, deans and college presidents; and creating awards and named professorships that support teaching.

UCI's science deans said many of the measures are already in place, including mandatory teaching reviews every two to five years.

"All University of California campuses require a formal evaluation of teaching commitment and effectiveness as part of every merit or promotion consideration," said Al Bennett, dean of UCI's School of Biological Sciences. "Teaching is taken very seriously, and substandard performance is grounds for denying a salary increase."

Acting physical sciences dean Ken Janda said: "We already do the things suggested, and constantly strive to improve our teaching responsibility – even in a time of tight budget constraints."

O'Dowd said that while progress is being made, many challenges remain in properly valuing excellent teaching. She was encouraged that despite tough funding cuts this fall, her school retained small discussion sections of 30 students for freshman biology. They were led by grad students using innovative teaching techniques developed as part of her HHMI program.

Provided by University of California - Irvine

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