April 6, 2010

Dr. Bruce P. Szelest, Assistant Vice President
Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness
University at Albany
UAB 101
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12222

Dear Dr. Szelest:

Thank you for your letter of March 29, 2010 (enclosed) in response to my memorandum of November 17, 2009 to Provost Phillips.

The Evaluation of Evaluations

I am glad to learn that the Provost is taking steps toward the evaluation of (teaching) evaluations. In all her public statements, the Provost has repeatedly confirmed her commitment to thoughtful and rigorous pedagogy, advanced research, and administrative transparency. Therefore, there might be some (small?) possibility that the inquiries into teaching evaluations she intends to launch will result in more than the predictable institutionalist "revision" of inconsequential issues. The only effective change which might at least halt the continuous decline of the University at Albany's ranking in the knowledge community is a comprehensive root change of teaching practices and their evaluation—a transvaluation of (teaching) values.

However, as a result of the history of unfulfilled promises for change at this university—at the departmental, college and university levels—I remain concerned that the Advisory Committee you mention (like many such committees before it) might avoid taking intellectual risks and shy away from confronting the complex philosophical and social issues that underlie thoughtful teaching and its evaluation. Instead of a bold, critique-al inquiry, it might simply repeat innocuous and reassuring pedagogical platitudes and offer some formulaic, self-protecting recommendations by putting the focus on the mechanics of teaching instead of its analytics. To put it differently, without rethinking the very structure of teaching evaluations, what is announced as a re-evaluation of values will become yet another ritualistic affirmation of existing practices with some insignificant modifications that will be represented (in the all too familiar pattern of PR fanfare in the University) as groundbreaking innovations in "strategic planning." The status quo is so well-protected that it has become impossible to change it from within—e.g. the existing departmental structures. Change has to come from the outside.

The formation of this Advisory Committee is taking place at a crisis moment in the history of the University at Albany: the University's knowledge ranking, which has been declining steadily, has now dropped to Tier 3, and (as I have mentioned in my previous memoranda) in the National Survey of Student Engagement of Spring 2008, the University is ranked behind its three comparison groups (peers, applicant overlap peers, Carnegie peers) in all five domains, including
(1) Level of academic challenge  
(2) active and collaborative learning  
(3) student-faculty interaction  
(4) enriching educational experiences and  
(5) supportive campus environment

This crisis is one of the direct effects of privileging easy, popular teaching and marginalizing difficult, boundary-thinking teaching and research at the university. The crisis of pedagogy at the University has reached such an intensity that it can no longer be obscured by public relations simulations, the “Going Forward Plan,” and other self-affirming “strategic planning” (Please see my memorandum of April 12, 2009 to the Provost, pages 1-14). The more the University attempts to represent what is (the status quo) as what ought to be, the more it loses its credibility in the knowledge community. The current mechanical and computational evaluation of teaching—which valorizes light teaching and the popular teacher, demonizes the demanding teacher and marginalizes the teaching of the difficult—should be abandoned.

Without a radical change in teaching practices not only will the University continue to decline in its ranking among universities nationally but it will also lose its status as a “research university” within the SUNY system itself (Please see “The Important Message from Interim President George Philip, March 10, 2008) and become a regional university college reverting back (not without irony) to its days as a “Normal College.”

It is therefore critical that the Advisory Committee not be composed (in the customary manner) of the same trusted “campus citizens” who are routinely appointed to all the university policy committees. The “insights,” “wise decisions,” and “experienced advice” of these trusted “campus citizens” are what has brought the University at Albany to this crisis moment.

A different group of thinkers-teachers-scholars who are in the early stages of their teaching and research (assistant and associate professors) and have not yet been indoctrinated by the vulgar pragmatism and anti-intellectual culture of “service” at the university should be given an opportunity to rethink the intellectual priorities of the university.

Anti-Intellectual Proceduralism and the Exile of the Pedagogical Imagination

The anti-intellectual culture at the university has represented rehearseable, easy, and popular teaching as the “state of excellence” and has obscured its anti-democratic character by using computational assessments and appealing to procedures, codes, and university regulations. Easy teaching at this (or any other) public university deprives middle and working class students from access to advanced knowledge and complex analytical thinking (See T. Ebert, “The Real Scandal at SUNY” attached to my previous memorandum) which are available to students at elite (private) colleges and universities. It thus becomes a means to further widen the class gap and regiment the existing social divisions of labor.
I recently observed a specific case in the evaluation of the teaching of a faculty member where an intellectually rigorous, analytically meticulous and comprehensive teaching report, which was prepared over several months of thinking, research and class visits was cynically marginalized because it had resisted foregrounding a computational account of teaching in order not to trivialize the pedagogical practices that were analyzed. An anti-intellectual proceduralism has been allowed to set the agenda and the mode of teaching evaluations through the alibi of institutional procedures such as:

"ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07"

And

"Administrative Procedures for the Preparation of Recommendations for Promotions and Continuing Appointment (9. Description of procedures used to present required peer and student evaluation of teaching”).

Consequently, substantive pedagogy is cynically obscured and trivialized by a transcendental formalism grounded in a bureaucratic metaphysics of procedures. A mechanical detailism has displaced the conceptual analysis of teaching.

Although I am not proposing that the existing codes should be ignored, I do argue that as long as they exist (which I hope is not for much longer), they should be understood in a manner that opens up a space for rigorous pedagogy and not be interpreted as sanctions for conceptual closure. One of the tasks of the Advisory Committee (if it is serious about changing pedagogical practices at the University) is to change these codes which have lost their historical relevance (if they ever had any) and are now empty formula used to block transformative teaching and its analytical evaluation.

To be more clear: the “ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07,” and the related codes for teaching evaluation belong to the 20th century and have little relevance to the philosophically oriented pedagogy of the 21st century. The “ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07,” which is constantly evoked as the sacred source document for evaluating teaching, is over a quarter of a century old. It was originally prepared in 1983 and approved by President O’Leary on February 8, 1984. In other words, it belongs to the time when Vincent O’Leary was the University’s president (1977 to 1990) and the university was struggling to transform itself from a Normal School (teachers’ college) into a major university center (U Albany Magazine, spring 2005: 21).

Even when the “ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07” was prepared, it was far behind its time. It was totally unaware of the advanced philosophical thinking about pedagogy which had emerged after the theoretical debates of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s (in the wake of the Johns Hopkins University Conference on “The Languages of Criticism and Sciences of Man” in October 1966). Some of the consequences of these theoretical
debates for pedagogy were published as early as the mid-1980's (The Pedagogical Imperative, ed. Barbara Johnson, Yale University Press, 1982), i.e. before the preparation of the “ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07.” The “Bill” was clearly cut off from the scholarly practices of its time and what were new philosophical inquiries into teaching.

Since its implementation, the “ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07” has acted as the “legal” alibi for blocking innovative and progressive modes of evaluation as “illegal.” “Legalism” has become the institutionally plausible alibi for preserving the status quo. It is time to put an end to the authoritarian uses of the “ADMINISTRATIVE MEMORANDUM ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING Implementing Senate Bill 8384-07” and end the “legalism” it has endorsed and deployed to marginalize thoughtful modes of evaluating teaching and scholarship at the University at Albany.

If the university at Albany is to stop the steady decline in its ranking, it needs to abandon the computational evaluation of teaching and end proceduralism and legalism. What matters in evaluating teaching is its conceptual substantiveness not whether it conforms to the codes in some administrative handbook.

The proceduralist and legalistic culture of anti-intellectualism should not be allowed to continue to trivialize teaching and its evaluation by invoking codes and sub-codes of laws and by-laws that protect popular and easy pedagogy. Given the crisis of knowledge at the University caused by easy teaching (what has given it the reputation of a "party school"), any re-evaluation of teaching evaluations should put conceptually difficult and intellectually complex pedagogy at the center and refuse to compromise with the easy.

Transparency and Intellectual Legitimacy

As for sharing my memorandum with others: I am in compete agreement with you when you write: “we very much want the work of the Advisory Committee to be as open and transparent as possible.” All my writings on these public issues have been, remain, and will be public. Transparency—from publishing the minutes of a departmental meeting to making public the details of a research project—is the condition of democratic inclusion and intellectual legitimacy and is, therefore, integral to any self-reflexive community (please see my April 12, 2009 Memorandum to the Provost, Part Two: “Cynicism, Anti-Intellectualism and the Culture of Secrecy,” pp. 15-21). Without transparency, there is only institutional simulation. You may publish all my texts (including this one) and share them with any and all members of the university community and the public at large. I only ask that you publish them in hard-copy or as PDF files so their contents cannot be altered. As part of the ethics of transparency in the discussion of public issues (“we very much want the work of the Advisory Committee to be as open and transparent as possible”), I am sending copies of this exchange to the officers of English Department, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Provost Phillips and President Phillip, to whom I had sent copies of my memorandum of 17 November 2009.
With Best Wishes,

[Signature]

Teresa L. Ebert
English Department

Copies:
Professor B. Arsic, Director of Honors Program
Professor K. Bell, Director of M.A. Studies
Professor B. Benjamin, Director of Graduate Studies
Professor H. Elam, Director of M.A. Studies (Fall 2009)
Professor M. Hill, Chair, Department of English
Professor E. Kearney, Director of Undergraduate Studies (Spring 2010)
Professor S. North, Interim Chair, Department of English (Fall 2009)
President G. Philip, University at Albany
Provost and Vice President L. Phillips, University at Albany
Professor H. Schank, Chair of Undergraduate Studies (Fall 2009)
Dean E. Wulfert, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
T. Ebert

From: "Bruce Szelest" <BSzelest@uamail.albany.edu>
To: "Teresa L. Ebert" <te609@albany.edu>
Cc: "Susan D Phillips" <SDPhil@uamail.albany.edu>
Sent: Monday, March 29, 2010 10:40 AM
Subject: Course evaluations at UAlbany

Dear Professor Ebert,

Provost Phillips has asked me to respond to your November 17, 2009 letter concerning course evaluations at UAlbany. Please accept my sincere apologies for the delay in response. Provost Phillips asked me some time ago to brief you on the steps the University was taking to address a number of important issues around course evaluations, many of which you raise in your letter, but I have not had opportunity to respond, until now.

Please know that since you wrote to Provost Phillips, we have been mobilizing to assemble resources and an Advisory Committee, similar to, but not exactly, as you recommended, to look into the myriad issues around course evaluations and how they are used here at UAlbany. As you may know, it has been about fifteen years since the University had a serious and comprehensive conversation around course evaluations. The ultimate goal of the Advisory Committee, formed in consultation with the Senate Governance Council, will be to make recommendations around a number of issues, including, but not limited to: the appropriate roles of course evaluation in tenure and promotion and in faculty professional development; reliability and validity of the instrument; and suggestions for moving course evaluations more toward the formative end of the use spectrum and away from mere numerical summative evaluations, as you suggest.

Along these lines, I would like to request your permission to share your November 17, 2009 letter with the Advisory Committee, and to post it on the Committee’s wiki. Please know that UAlbany faculty, staff, and students have access to the various resources available on the Committee’s wiki, as we very much want the work of the Advisory Committee to be as open and transparent as possible. If you prefer, I could share your letter with Committee members in hardcopy, but either way, I think it important to get your thoughts before the members. The wiki is available at https://wiki.albany.edu/display/irep/Course+Evaluation+Advisory+Committee, and once clicking the link, you will be prompted for your UAlbany netid and password (which should be the same as you use for MyUAlbany).

I look forward to hearing back from you, and I am also available by phone at 437-4928, or in person, should you wish to discuss these matters more personally.

Kind Regards,

Bruce

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