Who’s responsible for student learning?

On one level, the answer to the question, “Who’s responsible for student learning?” seems obvious: the word “student” is right in the question. Certainly, students are responsible for their learning, and they can do much to effect it.

On another level, teachers are seen as primarily responsible for student learning. B. F. Skinner said, “It is the teacher’s function to contrive conditions under which students learn.” Few teachers place all responsibility for learning upon students. We recognize what we must do to facilitate learning, and we work hard to “contrive conditions” for it.

A condition we might consider is teaching students to become responsible learners. Just as we can’t assume students know material we’ll teach in a course, we can’t assume that each student is a responsible learner. Students can learn course material and become active participants in their learning.

David Locher describes his success with this approach in his article, “Poor-quality students’ reveal teaching skill.” He relates how at a teaching seminar he attended, a prominent researcher told the group that faculty at a top-rated, highly selective, private university responded to evidence that their graduates failed to learn basic principles in their fields by saying that “they could teach better if only they had better students to work with.” This university draws from the top 2% of high school students; there are none better.

The author then identifies three categories of students:
1. “Outstanding students.” We could lock them up, throw them a few books, and they’ll master the material. They don’t need us to teach them.
2. “Good students” do what they’re told and know more when they leave our class than when they came. However, we only help them do what they wanted to do.
3. “Poor students” are unmotivated and lack knowledge or skills we assume they should have. They show us how well we teach.

Locher faced the challenge of teaching “poor” students by—teaching them. One of his courses requires students to understand very difficult material. Rather than continuing to be upset with the quality of students’ papers, he taught them to read and understand abstract ideas, to paraphrase ideas, and to synthesize the most important ideas and apply them.

His conclusion? “I am actually giving people skills that they can use in any major, any profession. Isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing?”

As the school year begins, faculty members might consider why we choose to work in this setting, working with colleagues and students to further intellectual skills of many kinds. A number of privileges come with the life we lead, as well as responsibilities. Since higher education remains an industry without broadly agreed upon standards, there are a variety of views on the responsibilities of all members of our community. A traditional view is embodied in the apocryphal story of a dean of students addressing a convocation of first-year students. To impress upon the mass the challenge and seriousness of the venture they were undertaking, the dean is alleged to have said: “Look to your left, and look to your right; one year from now only one of you will still be a student here.”

In that view of universities, the responsibility for learning and for success lies squarely with students. As discussed throughout this issue, more contemporary views hold that all participants in higher education are responsible for contributing to the overall success of the educational mission. Students still must devote time to reading, thinking, creating, performing, writing and class participation. Technology can not substitute for learner activity, nor can the magic of cognitive scaffolding, constructivist teaching, or any other sophisticated form of instructional design produce easy learning. Well designed courses can make the path less steep and with fewer thorns, but at a critical level teaching boils down to helping students find ways to learn.

One very promising way to reach students, especially those beginning their academic career, is through thematically related classes that make explicit the relation among the ideas in multiple courses. This semester KU is offering a few lower division courses linked by a seminar that highlights the intellectual connections between them. These “thematic learning communities” give faculty members a chance to engage in some interdisciplinary teaching without disrupting their usual course assignments. Groups of 10-15 students live in the same residence, share some classes and participate in a small seminar. In addition to having a rich academic experience during their first semester, students who participate in learning communities are more likely to continue with college in the second year than are first-year students in general. In this case, both the institution and individual faculty members are taking some responsibility for providing an intellectually satisfying experience for students. Faculty members leading learning communities will share their experiences at CTE on October 27 (see opposite), and you can learn more at the program web site (www.tlc.ku.edu).

Individual teachers can also enhance student success by providing an engaging experience for students in their courses. The tastes, values and perspectives of college teachers, however, are not closely aligned with those of their students. Even 20 years of age difference can mean a wide gulf between the interests of two groups, and our faculty is drawn from an international pool while a majority of KU students are from the Plains region. Meaningful learning is embedded in context, and it is not safe to assume that students will share an interest in the examples in which a professor embeds course ideas and concepts. Prof. Rick Snyder has been pondering this dilemma, and he is hosting with CTE a one-day conference on November 14. He has called for professors who experience an emerging lack of connection with students to share their concerns and propose better ways to engage students. There is more information about the conversation on page 6 and on our web site (www.ku.edu/~cte), or email Prof. Snyder at crsnyder@ku.edu.

These are two ways that KU faculty members and staff are helping more students learn better, deeper and longer. Students should be reminded about their responsibilities for learning, too. It would be tempting to emulate the legendary dean and inform students that there is no help and little hope, but KU is a place that promotes success. It appears to be our responsibility to give students the best chance to learn.

KU is a place that promotes success. It appears to be our responsibility to give students the best chance to learn.
CTE announces new program and fall schedule

CTE, in conjunction with the Provost’s Office and the KU Medical Center, kicked off the academic year with the annual KU Summit on August 19. More than 275 faculty and instructional staff participated in the conference.

And that’s just the beginning … This fall, CTE will offer many ways for faculty to connect to find ways of improving student learning, as described below.

CTE 2 Go

CTE 2 Go is our newest program. To use it read the “menu,” contact CTE to schedule it, invite your colleagues, and have Dan Bernstein facilitate the discussion you choose in your department. The topics we’re offering this fall are these:

• Peer evaluation,
• Teaching portfolios, and
• Student learning as a measure of teaching excellence.

To schedule your discussion, contact Judy Eddy at 864-4199 or jeddy@ku.edu.

Teaching Teas

At Teaching Teas, we gather in a comfortable setting to discuss topics of interest to faculty members and instructional staff. All sessions will be from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. in 135 Budig. No RSVP is needed. Beverages (including tea, of course!) and snacks provided.

September 4: Gauge and engage your class with a student response system. A hands-on opportunity to see how and why this technology can be useful with Larry Davidow, pharmacy practice.

September 17: Evaluating GTAs’ teaching. Suggestions on how departments and faculty can approach evaluating GTAs’ teaching with Dan Bernstein, CTE. Repeated as a Lunch & Conversation session on September 18.

October 1: Linking community and academic study with service-learning. The Department of English’s success with service-learning was one factor in their receipt of the 2003 Department Teaching Award. Find out how they’ve used service-learning to facilitate deeper learning for their students, with Emily Donnelli, Frank Farmer, Jim Hartman, Anna Neill, and Anjali Nerlekar.

October 27: Interdisciplinary teaching and learning in TLCs. Faculty who teach thematic learning community courses will describe their experiences with this avenue of interdisciplinary teaching, with Mari Maccari, history; Michael Vitevitch, psychology; Patricia Ybarra, theatre and film; Linda Dixon, FSAC; and Diana Robertson, student housing.

Lunch & Conversation

Bring your lunch to 135 Budig (cookies and beverages on us) for an informal discussion of topics described below. No RSVP needed. All sessions held 12 to 1 p.m.

September 12: Enhancing teaching to meet learning goals. Diane Fourny, French and Italian/HWC; Pamela Gordon, Classics; and Andrew Whitford, Political Science/ENVS will share results of their Faculty Fellows projects: broadening study abroad students’ knowledge of present-day Europe, integrating ancient Greek art into ancient literature courses, and learning in teams.

September 18: Evaluating GTAs’ teaching. A repeat of the September 17 Teaching Tea.

September 24: University Theatre in Your Classroom. See how a new University Theatre program supports classroom work and positions the theatre at the center of the humanities, with John Staniunas and Patricia Ybarra, theatre and film, and Scott Glasser, visiting professor.

September 30: Using simulations to facilitate learning. Richard Hale, aerospace engineering, and Lorin Maletsky, mechanical engineering, will discuss rapid prototyping models, a type of simulation that can be used in several different disciplines.

October 29: Templin Fellows. Dan Bernstein, CTE; Mary Catherine Davidson, English; Michele Eodice, Writing Center; and Diana Robertson, student housing, will describe their experiences teaching a one-credit-hour interdisciplinary course in Templin Hall.
Complex changes in the social fabric of the education business are changing the alliance of students, faculty and institutions that has supported the expansion of higher education during the last several decades. The economic reality of increased costs and decreasing public financial support of higher education has made student employment a flash point for differences in the perspectives of the constituencies. Academic institutions need to keep students coming through the doors to support their comprehensive mission, so university staff are eager to help students find ways to generate funds to cover the escalating costs of continuous registration.

Students and their families are paying more of the total cost of education through increased user fees, and they are sensitive to the progress students make toward graduation. Students are also less likely to accept or fit a traditional student model of extended adolescence, dependent on others for financial support while living an academic life in semi-poverty.

Faculty talk among themselves about the decrease in the amount of time students give to courses outside of scheduled class hours, and everyone has anecdotes about students whose work suffered or who requested special arrangements due to work schedules. Faculty often assert that students should be spending two hours in preparation outside of class for every hour spent in class; however, this policy is not consistently applied or followed.

The fundamental tension arises because there is a fixed amount of time in everyone’s lives, and there are many activities competing for their share. Few students will totally abandon their personal lives and/or work time to meet faculty expectations for outside preparation time. Similarly, few faculty will abandon their other professional goals and responsibilities to spend extensive time on teaching material that could easily be acquired through outside preparation. In a sense there has been a long-standing (if tacit) “live and let live” agreement in some circles; faculty do not flunk students who give effort well below expectations, and students do not complain too loudly about teachers whose energies are devoted primarily to other scholarly pursuits. If not everyone learns as much as would be desirable, grade distribution curves keep everyone from facing a crisis. Students leave the institution with degrees, and faculty receive student evaluations that do not challenge their continued practices.

What is the problem?
Into this stable situation there has entered a new element that may produce some disequilibrium and possibly even change. The community at large is expressing some dissatisfaction with the product of the collective higher education enterprise; graduated students do not seem to have the skills or knowledge that some people would expect. Leaving aside the interesting question of the accuracy of that perception, the widespread movement toward accountability and assessment of student outcomes looms very large in many faculty lives. If faculty are to be evaluated by the performance of their students (a state of affairs athletic coaches have lived with for some time), then those faculty who have accepted modest student performance as inevitable will be called upon to get more performance from their charges.

Should this actually happen in a meaningful way, students would then feel a new squeeze on their time, as they would no longer be sent forward in the degree process without meeting some publicly established criteria. If students were unwilling or unable to devote the extra preparation time needed to meet the performance standards, presumably the faculty would be held responsible for failing to accomplish the institution’s stated learning objectives.

What is needed?
This tension can be resolved by a cooperative and constructive conversation among constituencies to find an acceptable middle ground. It would seem useful for each element to identify its responsibilities and that we as a community consider these and other possibilities.

From faculty:
- Establish reasonable assessment criteria for student performance, including a realistic estimate of what percentage of the population should reach those criteria.
- Identify and maintain adequate teaching practices that go
Students struggle to find balance

Andrew Knopp, KU Student Body President

With the rising cost of college tuition and associated expenses, students today are increasingly facing a precarious situation. On one hand, there is pressure from parents who can’t figure out why it is taking their son or daughter longer than four years to complete his or her degree. On the other hand, many students need to work full-time to meet the expenses of college. These two pressures work against each other as going to school longer means more expenses, but packing in more classes to graduate in four years means less time for earning money. Students are hard-pressed to make time for a part or full-time job, in addition to classes and homework. Many students aren’t able to participate in extracurricular and recreational activities that have traditionally defined the college experience.

I made the decision to focus on school and find part-time work, which has included refereeing basketball games, being a waiter at a sorority, and working in the Student Senate office. I chose to pay for school with scholarships and loans, because I thought the opportunity cost of stretching college into more than four years was much greater than the benefit of a more lucrative full-time job during college.

Faculty should not lower standards as a result of this trend. Doing so would defeat the purpose of raising costs in order to provide a better education. Maintaining the integrity of the institution and the degree is paramount. Instead, faculty should simply respect the fact that many students have outside commitments, and sometimes this can pose difficulties. Whenever possible, instructors should find ways to provide flexibility for these students, such as giving plenty of notice as to when upcoming tests or projects will be due.

As a whole, the institution should find ways to accommodate the changing make-up of today’s college student. Nighttime and online class offerings are important for many working students, as well as the opportunity to pack classes into one or two days each week for students who need to commute. Furthermore, the University should work to create more on-campus jobs for students with flexible hours and the opportunity to read or study during downtime. These things can all contribute to an environment conducive to receiving a quality education while working to pay for it.

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Mutual responsibilities for academic performance

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beyond merely making material available but do not take over students’ responsibility to participate in learning new material.

- Take advantage of developing instructional technologies to help students use out of class preparation time in the most efficient manner possible.

From students:
- Arrange for sufficient time in your schedule to include substantial preparation and learning outside of class time.
- Accept the likely possibility that a degree will take longer (and will be more expensive) when employment or adult family life are a significant factor.

From the institution:
- Work with faculty and students to establish and maintain clear policies on the time expected for preparation outside of class.
- Give realistic advice to prospective students and families about the need for time and the likely duration of a degree program under different levels of commitment to academics.
- Reconsider the rules and benefits related to full-time student status so that students do not register for extra classes to meet the requirements even when it is ill-advised.
Using technology to promote student responsibility
Susan Zvacek, IDS

Expecting students to take responsibility and become actively engaged in their own education is a wonderful idea. Unfortunately, many students don’t really understand what that means in a practical sense, and it’s likely that your notions of “taking responsibility” and theirs will differ. Two strategies—holding students accountable and shifting some of the decision-making in the course to students—can help to reduce this perceptual gap and provide guidance for learners unfamiliar with this model.

Integrating technology, especially the Web, into your classes is a terrific way to lead students into an environment in which they can practice their active learning skills. Some examples, drawn from actual classes here at KU and elsewhere, illustrate this idea.

Holding students accountable for keeping up with the course readings and participating in class discussions are two examples of ways to help students develop as responsible learners. Building short, online practice quizzes into your course will motivate students to do assigned readings, and it is an excellent way to reinforce key ideas students should be gleaning from their texts. Interestingly, it doesn’t seem to matter whether the quizzes are heavily weighted, point-wise; students appreciate the structure they offer and realize the intrinsic value of testing themselves as a review and study technique. Also, by providing these exercises online, feedback is immediate, quizzes don’t take away from class time, and scores are recorded automatically in the online gradebook.

A typical class period offers a limited time frame for thoughtful discussion, so many faculty are turning to online discussions to provide a forum for reflective conversation about the course content. An excellent way to utilize discussions is to require students to respond to open-ended questions, and then to come back later and respond to some of their classmates’ postings. In addition, specific students can be assigned to generate discussion questions, moderate discussion, critique arguments, summarize postings, or develop follow-up questions. These tasks can rotate throughout the semester to provide a variety of experiences for each student.

Loosening our grip on the reins in a course can be tricky—most of us are comfortable making the decisions about how and when learning progress will be assessed, for example. What might happen, however, if you were to suggest to your students that they tell you how they’d like to demonstrate that they’ve learned the material? Because of the wide variety of technologies now available for instruction, students could create Websites or videos, give multimedia presentations, or write papers loaded with links to resources and supplementary materials. The online environment facilitates these proactive approaches by reducing the influence of the “authority figure” perception of the instructor that students (often unknowingly) bring to the classroom.

Helping our students learn how to be active learners and to take responsibility will provide them with valuable habits for life. Utilizing technology to get them started offers a workable setting to make it happen. For more on how to use technology for teaching and learning, call IDS at 864-2600 or e-mail us at ids@ku.edu.

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Proposals for “Professors Speak Out” due September 15

On November 14, a special one-day conference titled “Professors Speak Out: Challenges in Undergraduate Teaching and What Can Be Done to Meet Them” will be held at the Center for Teaching Excellence. The purpose of the conference is to provide a forum for professors to present problems in teaching that they are encountering, along with their ideas for solving these issues. Talks and discussions will not be “gripe sessions,” but they will offer arenas for faculty to share ideas for improving instruction.

Proposals for papers are due September 15. For information about submitting a proposal, check CTE’s web site at www.ku.edu/~cte.
Small departments on the Lawrence campus are invited to submit nominating statements for the 2004 Department Excellence in Teaching Award. According to Dan Bernstein, CTE director, the program’s purpose is to support the development of department cultures that advocate effective teaching. The award process gathers examples of innovative, collaborative and effective intra-departmental initiatives, honors those that are well developed, and shares them with other departments to further their development of teaching programs.

Nominating statements are due November 10 for the $8,000 award. For complete information, check the CTE web site at www.ku.edu/~cte and look under “Special Announcements.”

CTE’s advisory board named these faculty as recipients of support for these programs this fall:

**Faculty Seminar:** Paul Atchley, Psychology; Sheryle Gallant, Psychology; Mechele Leon, Theatre and Film; and Catherine Schwoerer, Business.

**Faculty Fellows:** Pok-Chi Lau, Design; Judith McCrea, Art; Elizabeth MacGonagle, History; Christopher Brown, Geography.

**Teaching Grants:** Yi Jin, Economics; Kissan Joseph, Business; Kathryn Libal, Women’s Studies; and Jeffrey Olafsen, Physics and Astronomy.

Before the summer break, CTE sponsored two events for faculty. The first, the Celebration of Teaching banquet, was held on May 8. Thirty-five teachers from small departments were honored by their graduate students:

Jan Roskam, Aerospace Engineering; Sherrie Tucker, American Studies; Allan Hanson, Anthropology; Tanya Hartman, Art; Kyle Camarda, Chemical and Petroleum Engineering; Susan Kemper, Child Language Program; Michael Shaw, Classics; Ric Steele, Clinical Child Psychology; Mary Hise, Dietetics and Nutrition; Keith McMahon, East Asian Languages and Cultures; Ted Juhl, Economics; Tom Booker, French and Italian; Curtis Sorenson, Geography; Paul Enos, Geology; Arne Koch, Germanic Languages and Literatures; Michael Godard, Health, Sport, and Exercise Sciences; John Ferraro and Marc Fey, Hearing and Speech; David Cateforis, History of Art; Elizabeth Kuznesof, Latin American Studies; Donald Watkins, Linguistics; Bedru Yimer, Mechanical Engineering; Apurba Dutta, Medicinal Chemistry; Joan McDowd, Occupational Therapy; Christian Schoeneich, Pharmaceutical Chemistry; Rick Dobrowsky, Pharmacology and Toxicology; Dennis Grauer, Pharmacy Practice; Thomas Tuozzo, Philosophy; Patricia Lowe, Psychology and Research in Education; Ray Davis, Public Administration; Robert Minor, Religious Studies; Maria Carlson, Slavic Languages and Literatures; Carol Warren, Sociology; Vicky Unruh, Spanish and Portuguese; and Hugh Catts, Speech-Language-Hearing.

In late May, 29 faculty and adjunct faculty members attended one of three CTE Best Practices Institutes. Participants included Glenn Adams, Psychology; Mary Christine Banwart; Communication Studies; Neal Becker, Economics; JoAnn Browning; CEA Engineering; Mark Cederburg, Social Welfare; Kathryn Conrad, English; Ben Eggleston, Philosophy; Reva Friedman-Nimz, Teaching and Leadership; Megan Greene, History; Robert Gregory, Health, Sport and Exercise Sciences; Gregory Hanley, Human Development and Family Life; Scott Harding, Social Welfare; Andrea Herstowski and Thomas Huang, Design; Douglas Huffman, Teaching and Leadership; Jill Kleinberg; Business; Canan Kocabasoglu, Business; Joan Letendre, Social Welfare; Linda Miller, Journalism; Michael Murray, Physics and Astronomy; Holly Nelson-Becker, Social Welfare; Jeffrey Olafsen, Physics and Astronomy; Jerry Penland, CEA Engineering; Judy Postmus, Social Welfare; Milena Stanislavova, Mathematics; Holly Storkel, Speech-Language-Hearing; Kelli Thomas, Teaching and Leadership; Rachel Thompson, Human Development and Family Life; and Catherine Weaver, Political Science.
Ten strategies to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning

Judy Eddy, CTE

One way to make our classes the exciting, intellectual exchanges we want them to be is to teach our students to be responsible learners. Sara Jane Coffman, an instructional developer at the Center for Teaching Excellence at Purdue University, has identified ten strategies that teachers can use to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning:

1. **Ask students why they are taking your course** and have them tell you their reasons in writing. Most students don’t think about why they’re taking a class. Getting them to think and write about it will deepen their commitment to the course and give you information about their needs, expectations, and goals.

2. **Be sure students come to class prepared.** Use a textbook with study questions and require students to complete interesting homework assignments. Start class with a quick quiz, graded or ungraded. At the least, have students bring to class a question based on their assignment that they’d like to have answered.

3. **Help students attain the proper mindset for class.** Use the time before class starts, and pay particular attention to how you use the first ten minutes of class, when students are most alert and attentive.

4. **Make participation and interaction integral parts of the course.** Use discussion and questions as often as possible. Explain to your students that you need to know what they’re thinking so you’ll know if they’re learning.

5. **Make students responsible for each other.** Have students pair up with a study buddy. Or assign students to study groups and give them class time to prepare for the first exam together.

6. **Teach students to behave responsibly in groups.** Make every member of a group responsible for the group achieving its goals.

7. **Model higher cognitive skills.** Let your students see your curiosity and the way you ask questions.

8. **Have students analyze their learning experiences,** and give them opportunities to give you feedback about how the course is going and to suggest changes that would help them learn better.

9. **End class in a meaningful way.** Have students summarize material, take a quiz, or think about “Why?”

10. **Don’t protect students from the consequences of their behavior.** Extending a deadline if a student experiences a crisis is one thing; extending it because the student failed to plan reinforces bad behavior. Coffman concludes, “By teaching responsibility, we not only enhance learning and raise the level of our classrooms, but we help produce responsible citizens and productive members of society” (4).