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Faculty Update Newsletter

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NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT
Welcome Back to New Normals, New Uncertainties, and Ongoing Realities

by Don Larsson, IFO President

Welcome, Colleagues, to the 2010-2011 academic year at your state university. On July 1, it became my responsibility and my privilege to become President of the IFO, the organization that serves all faculty members in the seven state universities of the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities system. Whether you are adjunct, community faculty, fixed-term, non-tenure track or tenure track faculty member just beginning your university teaching career or a veteran professor, the IFO is your exclusive representative in bargaining for salaries and benefits, protecting your rights and privileges as faculty members, and representing you in shared governance on your campuses and in the MnSCU system.

The IFO represents all state university faculty, but the IFO is its membership. You—**we**!—are the IFO. Whether you are voting to elect local and statewide representatives, deciding to ratify a contract or constitutional changes, or serving on the scores of local and statewide committees that allow our work to get done and our students to get taught, you remind everyone each day that the IFO exists because of its members working for our common good. Remember that you have to actively sign on to become an IFO member and participate in these activities. If you are not sure if you are a member, there is a good chance that you are not. Check with your campus Faculty Association office or with Cindy Finch in the state IFO office.

This week and next, I will be going to each of your campuses to meet with new faculty and others and to talk with your university presidents. In the months to come, I will use this column to address some of the significant challenges that face us in the next one to three years, including:

- "The New Normal" (sometimes called "The New Reality") of a state that cannot or will not provide the kinds of resources and funding for higher education that it had promised in the past; of changing demographics in Minnesota's school-age populations; and of "generational shifts" in the state's budgeting priorities.
- The uncertainties of what may happen after November when a new Governor is elected and new legislators take office; not to mention when a new Chancellor is chosen for MnSCU.
- The ongoing reality of planning for a new IFO-MnSCU contract for 2011-2013 in the face of these uncertainties and state budget deficits.

As your President, I need to hear your questions, your worries and your ideas. I believe that, working together, the IFO has the capacity to meet the unknown and to have its own voice heard in defining what "new normals" and "new realities" might be. Please send your questions and your comments to me at larsson@ifo.org.

In related news, this last summer has been unusually busy. Here are some of the more important developments:

Retrenchment at Mankato and St. Cloud
Retrenchments (layoffs) of probationary and tenured faculty have been announced at Minnesota State University, Mankato and St. Cloud State University. Just three weeks ago, 8 probationary and 4 tenured professors at Mankato received retrenchment notices. Around the same time, retrenchment notices went out to 26 probationary faculty at St. Cloud. These are fluid numbers. Earlier last spring, nearly two dozen positions at Mankato had been identified for possible retrenchment, but the actual number is now half that size. We expect to see further changes at St. Cloud—possibly some roll-back in the number of probationary retrenchment but also possibly some tenured positions being announced by the contractual deadline of September 20. In the meantime, the IFO will continue to see that contractual processes are followed, that faculty rights are protected, and that retrenched faculty are given the opportunity to take advantage of contractual rights.

Planning for Budget Cut-Backs Continues
The announced retrenchments at Mankato and St. Cloud are largely a result of planning for major budget cuts. With all signs pointing to a significant state budget shortfall for fiscal years 2012 and 2013, the state universities and the Office of the Chancellor are working to meet that possibility and with balanced budgets in place by the end of this fiscal year (2011). No other campus administration has yet announced plans to use retrenchment as part of their planning, but none of us can afford to be complacent, and all of us can expect to see incentives and pressures for new ways of cutting costs and increasing enrollments.

Planning for Students First Continues
"Students First," an online system that would allow students to apply, enroll, transfer, and track progress to graduation continues to move forward despite administrative changes in the Chancellor's office. John O'Brien, who started the development of this system as the project director, has left his position to take office as the new President of North Hennepin Community College. The new Students First Director is Jonathan Eichten, who has worked in several MnSCU institutions and the system office. He reports to Darrel Huish, the new Vice Chancellor for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, who also took office this summer. The IFO—along with support staff, students, and even some administrators—has voiced a number of concerns about the practicality, feasibility and unintended consequences of the Students First plan. At least some of those concerns have been heeded, but we will all need to remain vigilant to see that this system works as intended and does not wind up creating new problems for students, faculty and academic programs. Transfer of student credits especially will continue to be a major issue that will need careful attention. For more about Students First, see http://www.studentsfirst.project.mnscu.edu/.

To support the Students First procedures, the MnSCU Board of Trustees has approved several changes or new policies in its policies and procedures. Some of those changes could have an impact on faculty intellectual property rights, among other considerations. See the notes below from Connie Howard, the IFO's General Counsel.

New Trustees Named

In one of his last official acts regarding higher education in Minnesota, Governor Pawlenty once again sidestepped recommendations from an official panel for new candidates to fill vacancies on the MnSCU Board of Trustees. He reappointed Duane Benson, former NFL lineman and past president of the Minnesota Business Partnership, Jacob Englund, representing community college students; and Thomas Renier, President of the Northland Foundation. New appointees include Alfredo Oliveira, representing technical school students; Phil Krinkie, former state senator who was known as a very strong fiscal conservative and current President of the Taxpayers League of Minnesota; and businessman Michael Vekitch. Some IFO faculty will recall that Mr .Vekitch was Chair of the MnSCU Board of Trustees in the year when the IFO passed its first and only strike vote. All appointees will eventually have to be confirmed by the legislature.

Vice Chancellor Baer Resigns

At the May Board of Trustees meeting , Linda Baer, Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic & Student Affairs, announced that she would be leaving by the end of June to take a new position with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, overseeing the foundation's Post-Secondary Success Initiative. The IFO wishes Dr. Baer success in her new position. The Board of Trustees quickly confirmed an Interim Vice Chancellor to replace her—Scott Olson, who has been serving as Mankato's Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs. Dr. Olson has a very good track record of working openly with faculty at Mankato, and we look forward to the same kind of working relationship on the state level.

Chancellor Search Advisory Committee Appointed

Since Chancellor McCormick has announced his intention to retire, the MnSCU Board of Trustees has approved a Search Advisory Committee led by former Board Chair David Olson. Don Larsson will represent state university faculty for the IFO. Other appointees include Greg Mulcahy, President of the Minnesota State College Faculty (the union for the system's two-year colleges); student representatives for the universities and colleges, two trustees, two legislators, and four other community members, including former Minneapolis Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton. Edna Szymanski, the President of Minnesota State University Moorhead, and Kevin Kopischke, President of Alexandria Technical & Community College will also serve. For the complete list, see http://www.mnscu.edu/media/newsreleases/current/article.php5?id=165

IFO Names New Full-Time Academic Affairs Coordinator

For the past several years, the IFO position of Academic Affairs Coordinator has been split between two individuals. Due to several considerations, this year the position has once again become a single position for a faculty member with full release time. The new Coordinator is Dr. Donna Brauer, Professor of Nursing at Minnesota State University. Dr. Brauer's academic credentials and experience, as well as her past role as a member of the IFO Contract Negotiations Team, will serve her well in this post.

And last but not least,

Rod Henry Steps Down as IFO President

At the end of June, Rod Henry stepped down from his position as IFO President. After serving two years in that role and having served several terms as head of the IFO Negotiations Team, Rod is off to a well-earned sabbatical, after which he expects to continue teaching, probably from online. We will miss Rod's attention to detail, his unflagging good humor, and his wide range of cultural references.

FEDERAL HEALTH CARE REFORMS WILL SOON START TAKING EFFECT

by Russ Stanton, IFO Director of Government Relations

Last March, Congress passed and President Obama signed into law two health care reform bills that will bring about sweeping changes to the nations health care system. When fully implemented the reforms will prevent insurance plans from denying coverage based on pre-existing conditions or rescinding coverage based on health conditions. The Medicare "doughnut hole" will gradually be eliminated. The reforms will set up insurance exchanges through which individuals will be able to buy quality health coverage, and individuals that won't be able to afford coverage will be subsidized in an effort to move toward universal health care coverage.

The health care reforms are being phased in over time, and some of the most important aspects of health care reform will not take effect until 2014. The tax on "Cadillac" health plans will not be implemented until 2018. However, some reforms will take effect sooner; below is a brief description of reforms that may soon affect faculty members:

Coverage of Dependents Under Age 26

The federal legislation requires all plans to cover dependents until age 26. This provision says that all plans, including state plans and self insured plans like the State Employee Group Insurance Plan (SEGIP), must allow coverage of dependents up to age 26 starting on the renewal date of the plan. Therefore, all faculty members who have insurance coverage will be able to cover their dependent children under their insurance coverage, effective January 1, 2011. These under 26 dependents can be covered regardless of whether they are married, are a student, have their own job, reside with their parents, or are claimed as a tax dependent. A dependent that "aged off" their parent's policy can be added back on during open enrollment. **Coverage of these dependents is not automatic—faculty members should make sure they add their eligible dependents during SEGIP open enrollment which will be held in November.**

Coverage of Dependents Under the Age of 27 Under HRA, MDEA, and HCSP

Beginning January 1, 2011, faculty members will be able to be reimbursed for eligible expenses of dependent children under the age of 27 as of December 31st of the taxable year during which the claim was incurred. This will affect the Health Reimbursement Account (the $800 provided under the IFO contract), and the Medical Dental Expense Account (MDEA) for active faculty members. It will also affect the post-retirement Health Care Savings Plan (HCSP) for retired faculty members. This change will allow faculty members to pay for the health care expenses of dependents under the age of 27 with pre-tax, rather than after-tax dollars, resulting in a significant tax savings.

The federal law allows employers/health plans to cover the reimbursements for dependents under age 27 starting March 30, 2010 (the date the law passed)—but it is mandatory after January that the plans offer this coverage after January 1, 2011. IFO is currently working with MnSCU to see if the MnSCU HRA plan document automatically provided coverage back to March 30, 2010. This issue is still not resolved. If you have a dependent who will be under age 27 on December 31st, I would encourage you to hold on to your receipts until this matter is resolved.

Over-the-Counter (OTC) Drugs not Covered by HRA, MDEA and HCSP after January 1, 2011

Faculty members will no longer be able to claim reimbursement of OTC drugs (i.e. aspirin, cold and flu products, etc.) purchased January 1, 2011 under the HRA, MDEA, or HCSP. Drugs prescribed by a doctor, and medical supplies that are not drugs (i.e. band-aids, test strips, crutches, etc.) will still be reimbursable under the plans. **If you have a need for over-the-counter drugs and a balance in your HRA or FSA, buy all that you need before the January 1, 2011 deadline for reimbursement.**

It is anticipated that there may be difficulties with the Benny Card after January 1st, because the Benny card software is not set up to distinguish prescription versus non-prescription drugs. While I'm sure they will work out a solution to this problem, my advice is to **save your receipts, and if necessary, submit hard copies for reimbursement**.

MEDA Maximum Lowered

Beginning January 1, 2013, the maximum annual contribution to Flexible Spending Accounts (FSAs) will be capped at $2500 per year (the MDEA is an FSA). The cap will not apply to HRAs or daycare expense accounts. If you are planning major expenditures for items like Lasik or dental implants and want to pay these expenses with pre-tax dollars, schedule them before the 2013 deadline.

Medicare "Doughnut Hole" Phase Out

Faculty nearing retirement will be pleased to know that the Medicare Part D doughnut hole is being phased out. Prior to health care reform, Medicare Part D (prescription drug) participants had to pay all of their out-of-pocket prescription drug costs between $2, 830 and $4,550. Starting this year, beneficiaries that reach the doughnut hole will get a $250 rebate. The federal subsidies will gradually (by the year 2020) reduce the patient's share of the doughnut hole 25%.

MNSCU POLICY CHANGES HIGHLIGHT NEED TO PROTECT FACULTY INTELLECUTAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

by [Connie Howard](), IFO General Counsel

IFO Contract
Under the IFO/MnSCU Agreement, IFO-represented faculty are entitled to complete ownership and control over any intellectual property they create or any patentable discoveries or inventions they make as faculty member, **except**

- where the faculty member's normal workload was reduced to allow time for development of the project,
- where the university has provided substantial support for the project, or
- where the work is produced as a result of a contract or sponsorship agreement.

The presence of one or more of these factors does not automatically entitle the employer to complete ownership of the resulting work. In such cases, ownership should be shared by the faculty member and the university based upon the relative contributions of each. The IFO/MnSCU Agreement encourages faculty and universities to enter into written agreements in advance to allocate ownership interests. Such written agreements are essential to avoid after-the-fact disputes in which faculty are likely to be at a disadvantage.

Key Changes in the MnSCU IP Policy
In June 2010, the MnSCU Board of Trustees revised the system's long standing intellectual property policy. The revised Policy 3.26 is available online at: http://www.mnscu.edu/board/policy/3-26.pdf

Faculty should be aware of recent changes in the policy, and why those changes make it more critical than ever to get written confirmation of their intellectual property rights before undertaking development projects.

Substantial Resources
One of the most hotly contested issues in the discussions leading up to MnSCU's change in its IP policy was the question of what should constitute "substantial resources" sufficient to entitle the employer to an interest in faculty-created works. MnSCU rejected IFO requests to include of a point of comparison for evaluation of substantiality (such as individuals in comparable positions at the same institution).

Despite agreement by several campus administrators that it would be fair and appropriate to notify faculty before providing extraordinary resources that receipt of such resources would trigger an employer ownership claim, MnSCU also refused to include any formal notice requirement in the new policy. In fact, MnSCU System Director for Intellectual Property Gary Hunter went so far as to take the position that MnSCU should be allowed to claim an ownership interest in faculty-created works by retroactively designating resources previously provided as "substantial resources."

The final policy adopted by the MnSCU Board states only that use of resources is considered substantial "when the additional support received is beyond the normal support level made available by a college, university and/or the Office of the Chancellor to the individual in his or her position." The vagueness of the policy language and the wide discrepancies in support provided to faculty leave substantial room for mischief.

The union can and will grieve improper employer attempts to appropriate faculty intellectual property, particularly if MnSCU attempts to retroactively designate resources as substantial. However, to protect themselves, faculty would be well advised to resolve intellectual property issues before accepting any resources out of the ordinary. Get written confirmation from management **(not department chairs!)** prior to accepting any extra resources. Ideally, the confirmation should specify that receipt of a resource will not constitute receipt of substantial resources for purposes of Policy 3.26. If a faculty member agrees to accept extra resources that will trigger an employer ownership claim, the confirmation should spell out the allocation of interests between the faculty member and the employer.

Ownership of Scholarly Works
The prior MnSCU policy recognized that all faculty and professional staff owned their own scholarly works automatically. The current policy is far less expansive and employee-friendly. Professional staff were removed from the list of groups who own their own scholarly work automatically. In addition, MnSCU restricted the definition of faculty to exclude part-time, non-teaching faculty (such as librarians, counselors and coaches) who work too few hours to be formally included in the IFO bargaining unit. As a result, MnSCU and universities may begin claiming that the works created by administrators and part-time, non-teaching employees is work-for-hire owned by the employer rather than scholarly work owned by the creators. To avoid ownership disputes, individuals who perform IFO work, but who may work too little during a given term to be included in the IFO bargaining unit, should get a written confirmation in advance that their works will be treated as scholarly works owned by the faculty creator.

IFO HOLDS RETIREMENT WORKSHOPS

by Russ Stanton, IFO Director of Government Relations

Workshops for New Faculty
At the beginning of each academic year, IFO holds retirement workshops for new faculty members. The primary purpose of the workshops is to assist new faculty members in choosing between the Teachers Retirement Association (TRA) and the Individual Retirement Account Plan (IRAP) as their basic pension plan. All new faculty members have one year from the time of hire to make the choice. The choice can affect take home pay, the portability of pension benefits, and it can have a dramatic impact on retirement income. The workshops will also provide an overview of retirement related benefits for faculty members and some large tax breaks available to faculty.

The workshops are as follows:
August 18—Mankato
August 18—St. Cloud
August 19—Southwest
August 20—Bemidji
August 31—Winona
September 8—MSU Moorhead
September 10—Metro State

Faculty members should contact your faculty association office for times and room locations. They can also schedule a ½ hour individual meeting with Russ Stanton to discuss their particular concerns.

Workshops for Faculty Nearing Retirement
During late August, September, and early October, Russ Stanton will be putting on retirement workshops for faculty nearing retirement and meeting with individual faculty members to assist them in preparing for retirement. The workshops will cover contractual benefits related to retirement including:

1. The final year two step increase
2. Severance pay
3. The contractual early separation incentive
4. Supplemental retirement
5. Retiree health care (the Health Care Savings Plan, staying on the state plan, etc.)
6. Phased retirement
7. The Annuitant Employment Program

The workshops will also cover TRA and IRAP benefit payout options. The purpose of the workshops is to show faculty how to maximize their retirement benefits. Faculty members who think they may be interested in retiring in the next five years should consider attending.

Last session the legislation substantially reformed TRA benefits and contribution rates. These reforms will be covered by the workshops.

Some campuses will be offering special Board Early Separation Incentives allowed by recent legislation and MnSCU Board Policy. This new program will also be covered at the workshops.

The following are the dates that Russ Stanton will be at each university. Please contact your local faculty association for specific times and places, or to schedule an individual ½ hour appointment.

Bemidji - September 28th and 29th
Mankato - September 1st, 2nd, and 30th
Moorhead - September 7th and 8th
Metro - September 20th (St. Paul) and 23rd (Minneapolis)
St. Cloud - August 25th (for BESI eligible), and September 9th, 14th, 15th, and 29th
Southwest - October 4th and 5th
Winona - September 21st and 22nd (also Rochester)

LEGISLATURE PASSES TRA FUNDING STABILITY LAW

by Russ Stanton, IFO Director of Government Relations

The 2010 legislature passed legislation to shore up the Teachers Retirement Association's (TRA) funding. The TRA fund for paying benefits had a $9.1 billion unfunded liability (a $5.2 billion unfunded liability if one used a five year "smoothing" of asset values). The fund was only 59% funded. If nothing had been done to shore up TRA finances, the fund would have run out of money by 2032—and that is assuming an 8.5% annualized return on TRA assets. IFO took a lead role in supporting reforms that increased contributions and cut benefits to save the fund. The following is a TRA summary of major changes to stabilize the fund:

- Member and employer contribution rates, which are currently 5.5 percent, will each rise by 0.5 percent annually over a four-year period beginning July 1, 2011. On July 1, 2014, the employee and employer rate will each be 7.5 percent. A contribution rate stabilizer will be implemented that allows further changes to the contribution rates, if needed, after 2014.
- A temporary two-year suspension of post-retirement annual increases for benefit recipients will occur in calendar years 2011 and 2012. Beginning January 1, 2013, annual increases will be 2.0 percent. Upon reaching a market value funding ratio of 90 percent, the annual increase would be restored back to 2.5 percent.
- Members who leave teaching and opt to receive a refund of their member contributions from TRA will receive a lower interest rate of 4 percent annually, a 2 percent decrease, on their contributions beginning July 1, 2011.
- Retired members who have returned to teaching and have an Earnings Limitation Savings Account (ELSA) will receive no additional interest on their account balance beginning January 1, 2011. Account balances will earn 6 percent interest until December 31, 2010.
- Members who are not currently teaching (inactive), who have left their contributions with TRA and who are deferring receipt of their monthly annuity benefits will receive a lower interest rate of 2 percent on their deferred benefit beginning July 1, 2012. (Previous interest rates varied depending on date of initial employment.)
- The executive directors of the three statewide retirement systems (Minnesota State Retirement System, the Public Employees Retirement Association, and TRA) are directed to jointly conduct a study of defined benefit, defined contribution and other alternative retirement plans for Minnesota public employees. The report is due to the Legislature by June 1, 2011.

For a TRA chart comparing contributions and benefits before and after the passage of the funding stabilization law, click here: http://www.tra.state.mn.us/images/pdf/traplanchangechart.pdf

A lawsuit has already been filed by several TRA retirees, challenging the cut to retiree benefits. Arguments will be heard on September 15th.

Implication for IRAP

The increase in TRA contributions has raised the question of whether IFO should advocate increasing IRAP contributions to match the increasing TRA contributions. The issue has many implications, and is much more complicated that it appears on the surface.

Over the last couple of decades, employer contributions to IRAP have been 6%, and employee contributions to IRAP have been 4.5%. Contributions to TRA are 5.5% employer and 5.5% employee. The factors driving the contribution rates differ greatly between IRAP and TRA. IRAP is a defined contribution plan, where each member owns their own account and the contributions were set at a level that would provide long term employees (given reasonable assumptions on salary growth and investment returns) an adequate income, when combined with Social Security, to maintain their lifestyle in retirement. TRA is a collective fund where assets are owned collectively, and benefits are set by a formula passed by the legislature. Actuaries determine how much must be contributed (given assumptions of retiree life expectancy, salary growth rates, employee turnover, etc.) to keep the fund on course to pay future benefits, and the legislature adjusts rates to provide adequate funding.

If IRAP contributions were increased to match TRA contribution rates, employee contributions would go from 4.5% to 7.5% of salary, and employer contributions would increase from 6% to 7.5% over the next four years. That would mean more tax-sheltered retirement savings for IRAP members, but it would also mean 3% less take-home pay for IRAP members. It would also mean there would be less money available to bargain for in salary negotiations. Do IRAP members want to increase contribution rates to match TRA contributions? I would welcome member feedback on this issue (stanton@ifo.org). We need to develop an organizational position on this (approved by the IFO Board) before the next legislative session.

CHANGES IN HRA ACCOUNT CONTRIBUTIONS

by Pat Arseneault, IFO Director of Grievances and Equity

This year, there will be a change in the dollar amount that triggers the employer's 2011 contribution of $800 to be deposited into a Health Care Savings Plan instead of your HRA account.

One of the benefits the IFO negotiates on behalf of faculty is an annual contribution to a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA) account. You can use the money in your HRA account to pay for current medical expenses with pre-tax dollars. If you do not need or desire to use the funds that you have in your HRA account in 2010, the employer's new contribution of $800 for 2011 will be deposited in a tax-free Health Care Savings Plan, instead of your HRA account. Money deposited in a Health Care Savings Plan is invested and is for your use on medical expenditures once you separate from employment.

There has been a change in the threshold amount required to be in your Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA) account at the end of the calendar year in order to have your $800 contribution for 2011 deposited into a tax-free Health Care Savings Plan. The threshold amount was $500 in 2009, and has been raised to $700 for 2010. **If you have $700 or more in your HRA account as of December 31, 2010, the employer's contribution for 2011 will go into a Health Care Savings Plan instead of your HRA account.** You will still be able to use any monies remaining in your HRA account to pay for medical expenses incurred in 2011.

Faculty who have a balance of less than $700 in their existing HRA accounts as of December 31, 2010, will have the employer's 2011 contribution of $800 added to their HRA account at the beginning of the 2011 calendar year.

GUEST EDITORIAL
GOVERNOR PAWLENTY: SOCRATES AND I BEG TO DIFFER

by Monte Bute, Professor of Sociology and Social Science at Metropolitan State University

*This column first appeared on the opinion page of the **St. Paul Pioneer Press** on Thursday, July 15, 2010.*

Gov. Tim Pawlenty used a recent appearance with Jon Stewart on “The Daily Show” to promote his market elixir for the purported ills of higher education. If his idea of an “iCollege” were to become the norm, liberal arts professors like me would have little choice but to join Socrates in drinking the hemlock.

"Can't I just pull that down on my iPhone or iPad whenever the heck I feel like it, from wherever I feel like?" he said. "And instead of paying thousands of dollars, can I pay $199 for iCollege instead of 99 cents for iTunes?"

Implicit in this sound bite lurks a philosophy of education: College is primarily a consumer transaction. Pawlenty's business model makes no mention of quality, rigor, or critical thought. In his iCollege, the development of well-educated persons and well-informed citizens would take a back seat to the convenience and cost of buying credentials online.

Gov. Pawlenty: Socrates and I beg to differ. If only teaching and learning were so effortless. Let me assure you, as a college teacher and lifelong learner, they are not.

Education does not occur within the head of a teacher or between the ears of a student. Instruction takes place in that mysterious space between educator and pupil. The teaching-learning process is a dialogue — and nothing demonstrates this truth like its absence in a classroom, or online. The educator speaks and gestures inarticulately; the pupil sits mutely, mystified by the charade. The teacher pretends to teach and the student pretends to learn.

Monologues like this are a perversion of teaching and learning. What is more common in classrooms and online is what the social philosopher Martin Buber calls "technical dialogue." In this circumstance, the educator transmits knowledge and skills and students receive and utilize these tools. The transaction is only skin-deep. Technical education seeks competence, not the meaning of life.

In genuine dialogue, teachers bring not just knowledge and skills but their deepest selves to the encounter. The purpose of this vulnerability is to reduce the distance between the instructor and the pupil. This dialogical moment creates a sacred space, what Buber calls the "between." Within this realm — for both the teacher and the learner — intellect encounters heart and soul. "Good teachers," writes the educator Parker Palmer, "join self and subject and students into the fabric of life."

Once the student embarks on this journey of self-discovery, the quest for meaning is transcendent. A true educator does not impose but seeks only to further the student's personal destiny. For Buber, this ends the educational process. I would argue that he neglects a crucial final step in teaching and learning.

Whether it is an introductory course or a senior seminar, I begin each class by telling the students that it is my intention to help them kill their teachers. (Since my demanding nature always rubs a few students the wrong way, I take the precaution of explaining that my meaning is metaphorical, not literal.) This invariably baffles beginning students, as it should. My remark is like a Zen koan, a riddle to ruminate upon until understood. If it still puzzles a senior, I realize I am only one semester away from failing as an educator. What is the point of my tutelage? Pursuing their own counsel, students must leave their teachers behind, no matter how cherished or respected. Teachers, on the other hand, should welcome such autonomy, seeking intellectual peers, not disciples.

Socrates describes this last stage as "a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering." Carrying on a dialogue with oneself is the hallmark of becoming one's own teacher. This capacity for contemplation has always been the ideal outcome of a liberal arts education. The most valuable endowment that any university possesses is a wealth of such graduates — and wise the society that invests in their education.

Monte Bute is a professor of sociology and social science at Metropolitan State University. He adapted this column from remarks he made upon receiving the University's 2010 Alumnus Award.

CONTACT US

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