

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Ten Qualities of Self-Renewing Faculty

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Today's university faculty conduct their lives in the many dimensions of chaos. Our lives are profoundly affected by global turbulence and change. Even though we believe we are evolving toward "a new world order," we live our lives in the rattling shadows of pervasive doubt, confusion, and fear. This is not a time for teachers to be withdrawn or frozen by a failure of nerve. What is called for is leadership that generates renewal and hope throughout the uneven days ahead. All true leaders journey on the river of change, forging new paths into an unknown future. Only the planetary scope of leadership has changed. There are at least ten basic qualities shared by self-renewing teachers who seek to be their best in all seasons of their lives.

1. They are value-driven.

Self-renewing faculty are committed to values and purpose. They know what they prefer. Their primary anchors are within themselves. For them, renewal is not mere responsiveness to change; it is the repeated revival of the central concerns of their lives within the changing contexts in which they find themselves. Something is always at stake, something matters, and time gets organized around those critical priorities. They are determined to make a difference. They are mentors.

2. They are connected to the world around them.

Self-renewing faculty stay connected to the world around them. They are not loners. They seek out friends who can and will talk about whatever needs to be talked about Ñ the whole of life experience, up and down and all around. They listen and empathize with life everywhere. They care and communicate. They stay in contact with their children and/or parents, students and colleagues, and take initiative in sustaining relationships. They may not be joiners, but they feel that the world is there for them to enjoy, to grab on to, and to learn from. They network information, contacts, and resources. They support causes and take stands.

3. They require solitude and quiet.

Self-renewing faculty require times of solitude and quiet. They know how to refill their cups before they get emptied. They plan time for introspection as well as for interaction and decision making. They have private lives that they nurture and love. They have regularly scheduled times when they withdraw from routines to spend time alone. They retreat to some "secret garden" where renewal is predictable, simple, spontaneous, wonder-full. In solitude, they look, listen, meditate, and nurture themselves. They honor their inner life and outer boundaries.

4. They pace themselves.

Our current practice for renewal is to indulge in rigorous work schedules throughout each week, punctuated by "time-off" on weekends and vacations. In a chaotic world, occasional breaks are not enough to sustain the self-renewal process. They wash away quickly into our dominant routines. Renewal must be built into the ordinary, chaotic, ongoing rhythms of our life-styles and work-styles. Self-renewing faculty pace themselves. They schedule episodic breaks from their routine time, such as travel, holidays, vacations, retreats, seminars, theatre, sports activities, and sabbaticals. They are not trying to sustain optimal performance at everything they do; rather, they seek to be fully present and available for all the occasions of their life course. They are more interested in quality time than in busy schedules, more concerned with effective lives than

with efficient actions, more committed to integrity and style than to short-term results and applause. They do not constantly give themselves away, nor do they aspire to roles that do not fit them.

5. They have contact with nature.

Self-renewing faculty often find nature to be a dependable source of renewal. It may be hearing a wave hit the beach, seeing a leaf turning yellow in the fall, feeling a snowflake drift onto your cheek, or smelling a forest coming to life in the spring. Much of the teaching profession is spent away from natural forces -- in buildings and settings that insulate us from powerful renewal readily available to us. Yet there are few among us who could not spend a half hour each day in some natural environment -- to look and smell and listen.

6. They are creative and playful.

Self-renewing faculty are usually creative and playful. They are active, not passive. Rather than sitting on the sidelines to watch the world go by, they pursue ways to express themselves. They like to exercise, explore, and experiment. They indulge in humor and are able to laugh at themselves. They become renewed when they read books, see art they like, hear their kind of music, or experience theatre.

7. They are adaptive to change.

Self-renewing faculty are adaptive to change, so they keep pursuing their best options. They look for habits to give up and better ones to begin. They pay attention to what they are doing, how they are feeling, and whether they should change. They are caringly evaluative about their lives. Part of them is always looking in on the other parts and caring for the whole. They make decisions with enthusiasm and congruence and can say no as clearly as yes.

8. They learn from down-time.

Self-renewing faculty learn from their disappointments, necessary losses, and down times. Like the lives of most people, their lives are

sometimes full of funk and disorientation. They do not live lives without stress, failures, mistakes, loss and tragedy. Their lives are not sweet or perfect. They know that they have unresolved conflicts, limited perspectives, and impulses that sometimes overpower them. They do not deny the dilemmas of their lives. They accept the loose ends and unfinished business of their lives as part of their own future agenda.

9. They are always in training.

Self-renewing faculty never stop learning. When the world presents a problem, they assume that they can master it through new training. Learning, which is their profession, is an attitude toward facing the unknown. Self-renewing faculty don't feel locked into who they were so much as alive to the people they're becoming. Learning helps them feel their pulse, measure their paths, and integrate their lives.

10. They are future-oriented.

Self-renewing faculty are future-oriented. They live conscious lives today, with intentionality for tomorrow. They formulate scenarios of the future and rehearse them until they are leading anticipatory lives, vitally connecting their current conditions to desired futures. They create the future in the very act of rehearsing it. They celebrate life - past present, and future. They rejoice.