
October 14, 2009

TO: Dr. W.A. Kennedy and Tenured Faculty Members of MTU Academy of Teaching Excellence
FROM: Dr. Madhukar Vable, ME-EM Department, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, Michigan.
RE: Resignation from the MTU Academy of Teaching Excellence

It is with profound regret that I am resigning from the MTU Academy of Teaching Excellence¹. I have also returned my MTU Distinguished Teaching award and the Michigan Association Governing Board (MAGB) of State University award that the Michigan State Legislature bestows (letters and documents attached).

I have taken this unprecedented action of returning my teaching accolade after long agonizing thinking. Let me start by posing four rhetorical questions: What do you think of a workload policy in which a faculty member is released from teaching a course of 44 undergraduates for each graduate research assistant (GRA) advised? What do you think of a salary increase algorithm in which a faculty member is given 19 merit points (minimum number of credits a graduate student must register each year) for each graduate student advised but got only 3 merit points for teaching an undergraduate 3 credit course of 44 or 500 students—in other words, 600% more merit points for teaching each graduate student over teaching a class of undergraduate students? Is effort and the scholarship of book writing on par with external service? And finally, what would be your expectation from the Dean, the Provost, and the President when you bring all this to their attention? As you can guess, these policies are implemented by my department Chair and after trying for seven years within the department I filed a formal grievance that took two years to complete but it was also to no avail. Since I believe that administrators involved are intelligent people who care about Tech., I came to the conclusion that we are creating a culture at MTU where the ridiculousness of workload and merit policies can be rationalized as strategic thinking. All of this I bring out in my letter to President Mroz and the Board of Control (BOC).

A culture is not created by the administration alone. We tenured faculty also play a part. The administrators come from our ranks and thus the paradigms that influence the administrators also influence us. Over the course of my grievance I spent time thinking about these paradigms which we accept by default (as it is endemic to the culture) but are doing damage to education and scholarship. However, I want to be clear that when individuals choose to emphasize one aspect of education or scholarship it adds to the diversity which we should cherish in a university. When a system creates a lopsided workload or merit policies to achieve a goal with crusadic zeal then it smothers diversity. If we are unable to value the diversity of aspirations (contributions to the university mission) inherent in any group then how will we value diversity of people with fundamentally different life experiences and aspirations? In what follows I question the values² on which policies of our university are based and not the individual choices.

The central reason for the existence of MTU is education. Unlike many national research universities that draw upon our nation's smartest students, we admit³ students with a wide spectrum of ability and background. Admitting a student implies acceptance of a certain amount of obligation. Taking a teaching model⁴ or teaching attitudes (as a system) that may work with nation's smartest students and use it on our students is an abdication of obligation implied in admitting the student. High teaching evaluation such as the one you and I get are an indication that a teacher is reaching out and fulfilling the needs of a large spectrum of students—this takes time, particularly for a large class. A policy in which neither the quantity nor the quality of teaching has any impact on salary increases is administrative amnesia of why we exist as a University and is abdication of administrative responsibility that banks on fact that the dedicated teacher will not abdicate his/her responsibility the same way as the administrator did—this is using the love of teaching against the teacher. The difference in average salary and ranks between MTU Distinguished Teacher and Researcher (see letter to President Mroz & BOC) is a testimony that the problem afflicts not just my department but MTU. We are creating a culture in which the primary reason for our existence as a University, teaching and education, deserves less respect and reward and thus is of lesser value to the University than the secondary reason of research and scholarship.

I have talked about the toxicity of the number-culture and the fame-game-culture in my letter to President Mroz & BOC. I have talked about financial forces that are forcing the teacher and scholar on divergent paths in my letter to Governor Granholm and the legislators and made a proposal that would partially alleviate the problem. I have done so because I

1. The original plaque is sent to Dr. Kennedy, Director of CTLFD. Copies of the award are attached.

2. Please see my article differentiating the intrinsic and extrinsic values at: <http://www.mtulode.com/opinion/2008/12/03/strategic-planning-can-be-a-faustian-bargain/>

3. We used to have above 90% acceptance (selectivity) rate before we started processing admittance data in novel ways that results in 74% acceptance rate. See letter to BOC and President Mroz which are included with this file.

4. I describe the model briefly in my letters to President Mroz & BOC and to the Governor and to Legislators.

believe in the saying “All that is necessary for the forces of evil to triumph is for enough good men to do nothing.” There is no evil here, but I cannot remain silent and do nothing about the inversion of values taking place at MTU. Yes! at times achieving any change does seem futile when the biases about teaching are endemic to the culture not only at MTU but in our nation. But I also believe in the power of ideas and know that this power works through men and women who are just like you and me but who stand their ground.

The plaque of Academy of Teaching Excellence commemorates your dedication to teaching for which I thank you. I am resigning from the academy because like the teaching award it is a reminder that my love for teaching is making me THE SUCKER in the system and I am no longer willing to perpetuate the hypocrisy that excellent teaching that the academy and awards symbolizes is still valued at Tech.

