It’s All About Research…

By Jim Greer, Director, ULC

As a relatively new member of the U15, it sometimes feels like we’re now “playing with the big kids”. We feel a need to compete in “their games,” and we focus on a few playing fields (signature areas) where our team can “win” recognition and favour. Playing with the big kids is a risky business — one can feel bullied by policies or programs that privilege bigger players, pressured to over-achieve and maybe eventually collapse with exhaustion, frustrated at feeling under-resourced and always behind, and worst of all, become mired in gloom and self-pity. The currency of competition in the U15 is research. It is the same currency that is used to competitively rate players in their respective academic disciplines. Research is an easy game in which to keep score – grants in, publications out. H-Index, Impact factors, n-Index. People can squint about how the rules favour the big kids or the science teams, and some proclaim that we need to opt out of the game or even switch to a different league.

But what about teaching? Does teaching matter at all in the U15? We see many U15 universities rated poorly by their students on quality of instruction, levels of student engagement, and faculty-student interaction. We hear teachers lamenting that researchers get all the perks. We hear that in a game of teaching versus research the students are the pawns. Does “playing with the big kids” set us further behind in our mission to provide quality education to our students?

The research on effective teaching offers many messages. Here are two apparently contradictory findings:

1. Among research-active instructors in one department, there is a significant positive correlation between research output and teaching evaluations.
2. Across all instructors in that same department, there is no correlation between research output and teaching evaluations.

What can we conclude from this? All of the statements below would contribute to supporting these two findings:

- Some (maybe most) of the people who produce no research output are very successful teachers. They specialize in teaching.
- Some very productive researchers are also very successful teachers.
- Anyone who would produce no research output and who is also an unsuccessful teacher will not remain employed for long.
- A few of the research stars might be marginal teachers.
- A few faculty members may be coasting in both their research and teaching.

What I am trying to show is that the story about research and teaching is a fairly complex one and that simple answers may be simplistic answers. The increasingly competitive research environment brought on by the U15 does not really change the relative complexity of this story. For decades research success has been the primary currency for academic reputation within the disciplines.
Continued from page 1

and has served to shape this complicated connection between teaching and research.

Dialogues that pit research against teaching are sometimes labeled “the academic lament.” Too many advocates of teaching fall victim to this lament and the stigma, self-pity and marginalization it perpetuates. This lament is not productive. Teaching and research are connected, and it is research-inspired teaching and teaching-inspired research that offers us a way beyond. I had the opportunity to meet Mick Healey at a recent conference on the scholarship of teaching and learning. He has done some credible research and written persuasively on the research-teaching nexus. Encouraging and engaging the teacher-scholar in all faculty members is vital to silencing the lament. And broadening our understanding of the role of teaching and its importance in the world of disciplinary (and especially interdisciplinary) research is also important. Positive and constructive conversations about the place of teaching in a research-intensive university must be fostered. There is a valid worry that teaching may be compromised in our rush to be research competitive in the U15. It is that same fear (and lament) that environmentalists proclaim about global economic competitiveness. And the short-term / long-term consequences of inattention to the deep interconnections between teaching and research (or environment and economy) deserve more reflection and conversation.

If this piques your interest or stirs your blood, please drop in for a conversation at the Gwenna Moss Centre. Have a great 2013!

About the GMCTE.....

THE STAFF AT THE GWENNA MOSS CENTRE FOR TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS
welcomes everyone at the University of Saskatchewan to visit the Centre and take advantage of our large selection of professional development events, courses, resources, and services.

Please visit our website to find out more about our services and resources for new faculty, experienced faculty, sessional lecturers, and graduate students who teach.

University of Saskatchewan | www.usask.ca/gmcte