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Large Class Seminar
Center for Teaching Effectiveness
May 18, 1990

I am very happy to have this opportunity to speak with you about lecturing in large undergraduate classes. I hope you believe me when I say that I never take speaking before an audience for granted; it is always a privilege to be in the position of where people are listening to and then willing to engage me in what I have had to say. This is especially true (and somewhat intimidating when it comes to giving a presentation to colleagues.

This presentation is my first formal speech since being named a Vice Provost, with primary responsibility in the area of Undergraduate Education. I have a lot to learn, and there most surely are numerous challenges that await me.

UT, like research institutions all over the nation, are now realizing that for a period of time they have emphasized scholarly research at the expense of teaching. There is no question that I understand the importance of research: even though I have been the Director of

Afro-American Studies over the last four years, I have been able to complete two books, one of which actually arrived this week. I have just about completed all of the archival work for what will be my fourth book, and I am determined to complete this work in spite of my new job. Yet, without question, I agree with the views often expressed by colleagues that solid and active research makes for better teaching. I try every semester to incorporate my research into my courses, by using primary documents, newspaper accounts, and other research data in class.

Over the last few weeks, a number of people have asked me if something can be done to eliminate some of the large classes that have 400-500 students. When considering the scarcity of classrooms, I do not see that as possible. Even the suggestion that some courses have a discussion component to them, to where the students, after having heard the professor lecture for two hours each week then meet in groups of 20-30 to discuss the readings and issues being raised in class, seems highly unlikely, given again room availability and the amount of time slots this would require.

As you will see in my comments about strategy to lecture more effectively, I believe that good teaching can and does take place in the large classes. It is important that the instructor be clear on his/her goals. Moreover, I am very happy that here at UT, like at Stanford and several other places, departments and administrators are beginning to realize that more rewards must be given to the professors who consistently teach large classes: teaching must be evaluated in tenure decisions, in a way that it has not been in the past. Teaching clearly must count for pay increases. Teaching awards should carry some form of recognition for the entire year.

On four occasions, I have been rewarded monetarily for teaching the large class: the Lillian and Tom B. Rhodes Centennial Teaching Fellowship (which was worth \$2,500 in cash plus \$1,000 in travel monies), the Silver Spurs Centennial Teaching Fellowship (which was worth \$4,000 in cash plus \$4,000 in travel monies), the Jean Holloway Award for Excellence in Teaching (included a dinner, a plaque, and a check for \$3,162), and the Friar Society Award (which was worth \$10,000). I take each of these awards as an obligation that

I must live up to; in other words, every time I go into the classroom I must do my best. I am sure other people feel the same way and that is how teaching awards helps motivates us.

Specific Comments Regarding Large Classes

Since 1980, here at UT, I have taught somewhere around 12,000 undergraduates in large lecture courses. The primary courses I teach are History 315K, a lower-division American History course, covering the years 1492 to 1865, and History 357D, an upper-division Afro-American History course, whose time period is from the end of the Civil War to the Present.

In History 315K, a course that students take to complete one-half of the state requirement in American History, I have a captive audience. I teach this course on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 8:00. Over the years, this course has made my teaching reputation here at UT: I have won those teaching awards, and have been mentioned positively in the annual polls conducted by UTMOST Magazine. I have had many many students tell me that they like this

class, and that it is the only class they would take at 8:00, and that they never once missed the class. I always respond by asking them "why?"

I remain surprised when many of my students say to me that I initially captivate them with my enthusiasm for my course. Surely, I want to believe, other people are excited that they have the opportunity to teach? Maybe they do, but they somehow fail to spread their sense of excitement and enjoyment to their students. I do not know about you, but I honestly feel fortunate to teach at a place like this, and every day that I go into the classroom I hope I exhibit that feeling.

The students say that my class, even though it is in American History, a subject all of them know, at least on the surface, turns out to be a very learning and engaging experience. Here is something that I firmly believe you must do if you teach a large, general course, like this one, again understand that they come into it only because they are required to: you must have a "hook," something that will attract them and make them see "why" this is an important course: I start off

by challenging them about what they know about American History. I ask them, who discovered Europe? Since that is too difficult, then who discovered Germany, or England, or France? Next, who discovered America? When was the Declaration of Independence signed? (The answer is not July 4 but August 2). I give them a course theme, something that I see as essential in a course that touches on everything. My theme is "History From The Bottom Up." I also tell them a lot about myself on the first day, and how America's past relates to me.

From the first day forward, I constantly show them how each lecture I give relates back to the general theme. I try to make them analyze the American past.

Every time I start a new lecture, I give a rather long introduction; then the "meat" of the lecture; and then I have a conclusion. I try, at the end, to relate what has been said to something they are very familiar with, i.e., the political rhetoric of the Age of Jackson with the rhetoric of today. When I explain that Americans have tried to limit

immigration (and have called themselves Native Americans), I show how we still do that today.

There are certain things that I have decided that work for me. (1) I always have my lecture typed out, triple space. (2) I raise numerous questions: yet I do not allow for questions to be asked in the big class. (3) I do not read long quotes to the class. (4) But above all, every point that I raise, I try to show them how and why this is so significant. What does it tell you about the American past? (5) P.S. I always write key words on the black board.

About a year ago, I was interviewed by Alcade, the alumni magazine. The writer said that I was a teacher that students say they like in part because of the humor that I use in my lectures. Let me be clear here: when I first started teaching, I did not act myself. But at some point, I realized that I find humor in most things in life. I never do it at the expense of sex, race, religion, and the like, but I do find enough other things to poke fun at. It has helped me get through many of the tough issues that I have to lecture on. Use humor to make points, i.e., self-made man; whites give 110%.

To be able to lecture effectively requires the attention of the audience. I do not like to call people down, i.e., become involved in behavior matters, but you sometimes have to in a big class. I am always there and ready to go on time, and I always end on time, never late. I tell them to try to do the same. But I strongly tell them to not get up and leave class early, this causes all kinds of problems. Believe it or not, on occasion I have told people to quit talking, and I have even made several people leave class. But, these things happen only rarely, but I do make it clear of what is expected of them on the first day of class. From that point, things seem to go fine.

Finally, I also want you to keep in mind that in many respects much of what works or does not work for you or me as a teacher boils down to our own personalities. All of us have strengths and weaknesses, and these will, of course, determine to a large degree what will work for us.

Conclusion

Without question, teaching the large American History survey class has been a delightful scholarly activity for me over the last decade. I find my students to be very very challenging, and because I show them that I am interested and excited about the subject, they respond the same way as well. In some ways, doing this course becomes a form of missionary work for me: that I want my students to fully learn American History, to question and fully examine their past, and to simply enjoy the course. Though I would never say that all of my students agree that these things happened, I feel confident that it has occurred for significant numbers of them.