

Better explaining what we do

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Along with the usual signs of spring that bring the cherry blossoms and daffodils to Washington, I am learning of another annual event—the spring meetings of organizations, associations and agencies. The opportunities these provide to view education across many domains and interests underscore several common themes of importance to our work in psychology.

For example, the new president of American Council on Education,

Stanley Ikenberry reflected that the 20th century came to an end in the late 1980s. By 1990, the new era already began and with it the beginning of the new century.

With this, the environment changed irrevocably. For example, there has been an end to the Cold War, which has meant a reshaping of the academic culture as well as the research agenda. There has been a push by the corporate sector for a smaller role of government in our society, for a balance between a foreign and a domestic agenda and for deficit reduction.

The emergence of a global economy has brought a re-engineering of the corporate sector and a downsizing of companies—both of which have brought a foreboding sense of insecurity no matter what one's actual job situation has been. America looks at itself differently and this includes how it looks at and thinks about higher education.

Ensuring quality education

And today students, parents and potential employers are asking to be assured of the quality and relevance of our academic programs. While some among us have carefully thought about and addressed these questions, most in higher education have not. And, we must; it is no longer an option. We cannot expect individuals, government or the private sector to continue to invest in a system that they don't understand.

How do we answer these questions? First, each of us must understand what these questions are. We must listen to the questions raised in our respective communities, by our legislators, employers, students and others who are forming opinions about our role and making decisions that impact our daily work. Once you start focusing on what folks want from higher education, you realize that we all want the same goal; we all want to enhance learning, advance knowledge, contribute to the nation's good. I've often found that at least for our discipline of psychology, the problem is not that we cannot meet the demands our publics seek from higher education, but that we are not good at explaining what we do in terms that our constituents understand and want. For example, a recent note from Curt Burgess, PhD, a Presidential Faculty Fellow from the psychology department at University of California-Riverside, proposes that we must move away from arguing about the relative importance of teaching vs. research. Rather, he proposes that we move to the more relevant concept of faculty impact on student education; a concept that encompasses the many roles of faculty and focuses this work on our students.

This approach provides an important response to a major concern of the American public—that education needs to focus on students' learning. It is a theme recognized not only by educators but, from listening at these many spring meetings, by researchers and their major funding agencies—public and private. We must realize that many view the faculty role as one of arrogance, privilege and isolation. They think that teaching occurs only in the classroom; they hear that faculty "teach" one, two or three courses a semester and conclude that faculty are loafers; and worse even, loafers with tenure. All salt in the wounds of a public fearing for their own job security and further exacerbated by the continuing rise in tuition costs.

The good news

The good news is that most of us don't need to change what we do, but rather learn, as Curt has, how to explain what we do in ways that the public can understand and support. Surveys and conversations alike suggest that the American public want our graduates to be able to write, think critically, have a work ethic, be able to move easily in a world of change. We all want to enhance learning, advance knowledge, contribute to the nation's good. To achieve these goals, faculty with their students must be involved in teaching, research and service/practice—all familiar roles to each of us.

The difference the world now demands is that we learn to explain these activities in terms of our role as educators—in terms of how these activities impact on student learning.