Dissecting Excellence

by
Harold H. Wolf, Ph.D.
Professor of Pharmacology and Toxicology
University of Utah

Rho Chi Lecture
Delivered in Washington D.C.
March 12, 2000

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Harold H. Wolf, Ph.D.
Anticonvulsant Drug Development Program
Department of Pharmacology & Toxicology
The University of Utah
30 S 2000 E RM 201
Salt Lake City, UT 84112-5820

I am pleased and honored to be the first recipient of the Rho Chi Lecture Award in the new millennium. When invited to make this presentation, I considered offering some science-based remarks relating to our research outcomes in the area of antiepileptic drug discovery where there is much to say that I believe many would find interesting. However, I soon decided to follow a very different path this afternoon and discuss a far more general topic, one which I suspect will capture the attention (at least initially) of all in the room. For those in Rho Chi and Phi Lambda Sigma share common interests in attaining and nurturing meritorious academic achievement. Thus, during the next 30 minutes I'd like to focus attention on issues of institutional academic excellence: What is it? Why do we seek it? How do we achieve and maintain it? And, what are some of its' unintended consequences?

Crafting remarks for events like this is invariably both satisfying and challenging. Satisfying in that it provides an opportunity to reexamine and likely reaffirm personal views that have been honed over many years. However, in this situation, the challenge is far greater for several reasons. It is highly likely that all here today have read about, thought about and discussed academic excellence in a host of formal and informal forums. Additionally, most have had innumerable dealings with the concept. At varying times, we've searched for it, designed strategies to attain it, promoted our success in achieving it, and have lamented its loss. Thus, the vast majority of you have firm opinions about these matters and I harbor no delusions about my ability to produce radical changes in your views. Moreover, I have done no scholarly research in this area, have no base of solid data to support my contentions and have never published a popular

book on the subject. What I bring to this forum is a sincere, long-standing commitment to the creation and sustenance of academic excellence and a range of mid-level academic leadership experiences where I've labored to make this happen. I also bring a consistency of beliefs rather than much startling new thought. Thus, the older members in attendance may recognize concepts and views that I have been espousing publicly for several decades.

Finally, it will be apparent that I have at least as many questions to raise as I have answers to provide. For this, I offer no apology. Most of these questions defy single, simple answers. Moreover, as educators, we know full well that the artful use of questions can focus attention on matters which demand some action. And that is what I intend to do.

Let us begin by considering excellence- what it is, how it is judged and why it is important. Certainly there are many varieties of excellence. There is intellectual excellence; excellence in music, arts and sports; in statesmanship and craftsmanship; in designing famous dams and in damning infamous designs; and in an unending list of human endeavors, outcomes and experiences. Moreover, there are types of excellence that involve doing something well and types that involve being a certain kind of person. And, importantly, there is excellence that involves comparisons between people and that which involves comparison between myself at my best and myself at my worst[1]. Amidst so many forms and varieties, how do we recognize it?

It seems appropriate to start with the thought that excellence, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. That which is deemed first class and meritorious by one person can readily be judged rather commonplace by another. We all recognize that the term has major subjective connotations and, as such, is strongly influenced by personal experience and expertise, individual expectations, and various types of cultural bias. For example, if I were to attend a rap performance in the company of several teenagers, I seriously doubt that we could agree on the excellence of the evening's entertainment. However, I'm equally convinced that similar disagreement could be found among adults departing a symphony performance. Some may have judged the quality of the concert on the basis of the technical precision of the orchestra, while others may well have made a value judgement based on how often they were roused from peaceful slumber by the thundering of timpani--the fewer the awakenings, the greater the merit of the performance. The point being that although the term "excellence" is common in our daily conversations, frequently the standards which define the term are nonexistent or vary considerably, tend to be extremely subjective, and often have little applicability beyond the world of advertising. Thus, we hear of unsurpassed excellence in the ride of our automobile, the efficiency of our toothbrush, and the palatability of our microwaved dinner.

The situation seems only marginally better when the term is applied to universities. Certainly it is clear to all that "Wasatch State" has an excellent football team when its record shows only two losses over a three year span, and when its archrival in the traditional annual game has made only five first downs over the past decade. And that may be enough for some to say that "Wasatch State" is an excellent university. But the

matter is somewhat more complex when the merit of academic programs is to be judged. What components go into that equation? The number of books in the library? Student/faculty ratios? Number of Nobel Laureates on campus? Quality of instruction? Contributions to economic development? Loyalty of alumni? Successes of graduates? Size and appearance of the physical plant? Magnitude of the endowment fund? Amount of external, competitive funding? Quality and quantity of scholarly contributions? Column inches in national print media? I would suggest that all of these and many additional criteria contribute to establishing the "reputation" of a university which, in turn, permits individuals to feel comfortable in making judgments concerning excellence.

Let us recognize, however, that whereas standards for acceptable performance on the part of universities are available and are employed for accreditation purposes, standards for that amount of additional superior performance leading to a designation of excellence are far more vague and subjective. Moreover, since large universities accommodate numerous academic programs, each highly likely to vary in the quality of its effort, labeling one university adequate and another excellent should not be done without considerable trepidation. Nevertheless, most of us do this privately, if not publicly, and I suspect that there are some among us who would be willing to draw up a rank ordered list of the top 10 U.S. institutions of higher education which they consider academically excellent. Never mind that the population of institutions must encompass those like Reed College, whose primal mission is "...to develop in undergraduates the ability to be both analytical and compassionate... to posses a tough mind and a soft heart"(attributed to President Paul Bragdon in personal correspondence from William Naito,October,1985);

and places like Rockefeller University with a professoriate of 50 and a primal emphasis on research outcomes; and includes a multitude of private and public colleges and universities which embrace both ends of this mission spectrum. Never mind that excellence comparisons between institutions make little sense unless the comparisons are based on similar missions and we have reliable data which speak to outcomes and accomplishments. When we include an institution on such a list, it's most often there because of a passing familiarity with certain aspects of its reputation rather than an analysis of how well its accomplishments match its missions. In such situations, subjectivity is all we have. Well, not quite--for its says right here in the brochure from "Swiash U" that its tradition for academic excellence is unparalleled (or remains firm; or has been strengthened; or has been rediscovered). There is much truth in James Schmotter's observation that "American higher education may have failed to develop understandable measures of quality, but has been successful in creating a public-relations machine that would make P.T. Barnum blush."[2] For these and other reasons, and despite annual efforts of U.S. News and World Report[3], I place little stock in the phrase "an academically excellent institution," especially when referring to universities.

Why is it that virtually all colleges and universities strive for excellence? There are many pragmatic reasons. Obviously, few are likely to enroll at an institution with a long tradition of searching for mediocrity. Additionally, we live in a society where limitations on resources for higher education are ubiquitous and where competition and selection are demanded to ensure a good return on investment. Perceived excellence plays a major role in such competition. There are also important philosophical reasons. As John

Gardner observes, "Our society cannot achieve greatness unless individuals at many levels of ability accept the need for high standards of performance and strive to achieve these standards within the limits possible for them...and society is bettered not only by those who achieve (excellence) but by those who are trying."[4]

I have no quarrel with any institution's quest for excellence. I do wish that most would be a bit more circumspect before claiming to have captured it, skinned it, and tacked it to the wall of the Alumni House. I am also troubled when surface symbols are perverted to enhance the perception that institution has achieved excellence without demonstrating attendant improvement in academic quality. For example, there is a national trend (and my State is certainly no exception) to rename colleges as universities. In commenting on the rationale for such a change, proponents argue that an important factor is the status of the term "University" in making the diploma more saleable. While there are certainly sound reasons for renaming academic institutions, I'm not convinced this is one. Do potential employers really believe that the 2002 graduates of "Western Zion University" will be capable of far better performance than the 2001 graduates of "The College of Western Zion?" I think not. The real problem with cosmetic approaches to excellence is that they tend to foster illusion over reality. Unfortunately, a comfortable illusion is often preferred to disquieting reality. Thus, it is all to easy to be satisfied with the illusion and never expend the effort to deal constructively with the reality.

Problems in identifying academic excellence are not always so vexing. Indeed, most faculty probably feel that they can readily identify those centers of excellence which

specifically relate to their scientific, humanistic, or professional disciplines. Thus , if I were to ask 50 faculty in the relatively small field of pharmaceutics, from 50 different colleges of pharmacy, to compile a list of those 6 departments which they feel produce excellent outcomes in pharmaceutics, I believe that most individuals could do this easily and comfortably. Moreover, I suspect that there would be rather close agreement for those centers of excellence so identified-- as long as I didn't ask for a rank ordering. A high degree of response homogeneity should not be surprising, for the standards of excellence utilized by such faculty are likely to be similar and probably would include number and reputation of faculty, recent contributions to the discipline's knowledge base, amount of external funding, size of the graduate program, placement and accomplishment of graduates, space and research instrumentation available, etc. I further suspect that, within comprehensive universities, faculty from a wide range of fields could compile similar lists for their discipline with similar good agreement. While the specific indicators of excellence may vary from field to field, I believe that what constitutes superior academic performance is well understood by those laboring within a discipline.

On the other hand, if these very same individuals were asked to make comparative value judgements about the college which houses their discipline, I believe their responses would demonstrate far more heterogeneity based on less clear, certainly more subjective, and even conflicting notions of the standards to be used. Thus the question arises, is it a reasonable expectation, in comprehensive universities, that colleges achieve academic excellence? And, if the expectation is reasonable, what are the critical components and resources necessary to engender such excellence? It is into these muddy waters that I

wish to steer my remaining comments, recognizing that, in doing so, I expose my own naked bias and subjectivity. However, my objective to direct some collective thought to the issues involved and, if this occurs, I will consider the benefits fully worth the risk.

Let me emphasize that my remarks relate to colleges in comprehensive, research-oriented universities like the University of Utah, i.e., institutions that educate and train undergraduates, doctoral-level graduate students, as well as professional students and profess a serious commitment to scholarship, research and other creative endeavors. While an aspiration for academic excellence is both reasonable and commendable in such colleges, its attainment is likely to require the presence of at least six critical components. Some are tangible and easily identified, while others are attitudinal and less readily subject to precise measurement.

An initial, fundamental requirement is a clear exposition of college goals and objectives which states what the college *intends* to do--not just what it *wants* to do. A statement of mission which describes explicitly and unambiguously the programs, functions, and responsibilities the college is willing to undertake is necessary for several reasons. First, it is needed to chart the course for future actions and help establish the priorities for allocation of limited resources. Additionally it permits those in the institution to direct and coordinate their efforts in ways congruent with such goals and enables those outside the institution to be more realistic in what should be expected from the college, Finally, this provides the impartial observer with a necessary baseline and increases the probability that appropriate outcomes will be examined in evaluating the quality of the

enterprise. Without such information, it is most difficult to judge where a college is headed and quite impossible to state that it has arrived.

Obviously, statements of this type can only be meaningful if they are products of considerable faculty input and acceptance and reflect to a reasonable degree the expectations of those constituencies served by the college. It is also important that when such statements speak of excellence, they consider the frame of reference to be applied. For example, most would agree that Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa represent excellence in swatting a baseball - but what about the Salt Lake Buzz first baseman who bats .400? The game is the same, but the league is very different. In crafting mission statements, it is indeed important to know the level and nature of your academic league.

When we at our home institutions discuss excellence, is our frame of reference national in scope? Or is it directed toward statewide preeminence, distinction within the city limits, or simply, to be the best between the interstate and the shopping mall? If we embrace national standards of excellence, do our attitudes and behaviors match our expectations? Does the persistence of our commitment match the flower of our rhetoric? And, importantly, how do we react when our expectations appear incongruent with those of the citizenry whose tax dollars are important to our endeavors? Do we revise our frame of reference and seek refuge in a different league?

Additionally, it would be foolish to expect all colleges to design universally applicable mission statements. For it is unnecessary, unrealistic and unwise for every college to

have stated goals and objectives which attempt to produce excellence in the full range of academic programming that the parent university espouses in its detailed statement of purpose. As a single example, how could any university afford to commit resources to the development of nationally recognized excellence in all of its science departments? In the final analysis, the achievement of institutional excellence, at college and university levels, is less likely to be dependent on the number of goals being pursued and more dependent on demonstrated success in accomplishing, with distinction, a limited set of objectives.

Few would disagree that adequate resources are also necessary for the generation and perpetuation of academic excellence. My own view of required resources extends beyond physical facilities, equipment inventories and budgetary totals and includes students and faculty. Indeed, as Warren Bennis reminds us..."the only capital that really counts is human capital."[5] With a critical mass of competent, dedicated and motivated faculty, excellence may be a realistic expectation for any college. Without this resource, it is an impossible dream. Similarly, student quality must be a vital part of the resource equation.

Most publicly assisted colleges and universities go through extended periods of fiscal hardship. How they respond during such difficult times says much about the true frame of reference for their commitment to academic excellence.

Let me illustrate by way of example. A number of years ago, our university, like many, upgraded admission standards to improve the quality of entering students, thereby enhancing both their learning opportunities and the probability that they would be successful in their academic pursuits. As a result of the more egalitarian sentiments of our academic neighbors and the state legislature, that portion of our budget derived from state fund has suffered. A pragmatic response would be to revert to more lenient admission standards-and perhaps we must do this.

But as part of such discussions we should ask ourselves how this may impact the visions of excellence we seek. Are our visions still national in scope or are they limited by the mountains that surround us? Are we ready to join a different academic league? Our chronic inability to provide nationally competitive faculty salaries represents another consequence of inadequate state support. When we endorse arguments and accept the rationalization that this disparity in faculty salaries is no worse than that felt by other wage-earners state-wide, perhaps the franchise has already been transferred.

In most discussions of academic excellence, issues of adequacy of support tend to dominate. As a fledgling administrator, I took to heart Eugene O'Neill's admonition that "You can't build a marble temple from a mixture of mud and manure." As a more seasoned administrator, I disregarded that advice and went about building. And I only became really testy when I had to take cuts in the amount of mud in the mixture.

A third component of academic excellence is the emphasis given in our varied endeavors to the related processes of teaching and learning. We have yet to master and widely apply

mechanisms that will improve the level of active student involvement in the learning process. We still struggle to find reliable ways whereby students learn to integrate and apply existing knowledge from diverse fields in the reality of problem solving. We appreciate the urgent need to improve markedly both verbal and written communication skills but all too often fail to recognize that the development of these attributes requires practice, constructive criticism and significant amounts of individual attention and faculty effort. And colleagues willing to expend such effort seldom receive appropriate admiration and other benefits commensurate to their success. What importance do we place on training students to analyze critically new ideas or think anew about familiar concepts; on instilling in those we teach a love for raising questions and an appropriate disdain for overly pat answers; on creating a learning environment characterized by motivation for ongoing discovery which perseveres with a bright intensity; and on fostering in our graduates a retrospective conviction that the real worth of education in our colleges was its long-term, positive impact on their ability to approximate their potential? Do we truly value such outcomes and the professoriate that catalyzes them? Where do peers and others usually rank such faculty in the continuum of academic excellence among individuals? Where should they rank? These are some of the issues that colleges must face as they strive for excellence in their educational programs.

Another component is the presence of a tangible commitment to scholarship, creative work and research. While colleges in comprehensive universities have a clear responsibility to provide worthwhile and meaningful learning experiences for their students, they have an equivalent responsibility to expand the base of existing knowledge

and make these new truths known to a society which depends on such activities to meet current and future challenges. Indeed, this is an absolute prerequisite for institutional excellence. moreover, in most situations, teaching endeavors and the process of creative work and discovery are mutually reinforcing.

A logical extension of this commitment is the selected development of strong graduate programs in those disciplines in which a critical mass of competent faculty exist, along with the physical and fiscal resources required to mount a quality effort. As a corollary, graduate programs should not be attempted nor continued in those situations where resources, human and otherwise are simply insufficient to justify graduate training as an appropriate mission of the college. While superb graduate programs contribute mightily to a college's reputation for excellence, a single substandard program can do great harm.

A fifth critical element in my equation for college excellence is an academic environment that promotes the concept that each of us is capable of much additional progress toward individual excellence and that supports this concept visibly and consistently. Daniel Yankelovich informs us that fewer than 25% of workers say that they work at full potential, and some 60% believe that they do not work as hard as they once did. Roughly 75% say that they could be significantly more effective than they are now.[6]

How many of us in academic posts have maximized our potential for excellence? How much progress toward institutional excellence would occur if only a fraction of such additional individual potential were achieved? Why do we frequently assume that the

quickest and surest path to excellence is to recruit the best and brightest from distant academic pastures while doing relatively little to retain those productively cultivating the intellectual fields in our own back forty -- all the while forgetting that, just a short time ago, these very individuals were the objects of our intense affection and recruitment efforts? Why is it relatively easy to generate enthusiasm and resources to attract outstanding individuals to join our ranks and, yet, do difficult to generate similar enthusiasm for their subsequent success? In academia does familiarity breed complacence rather than contempt? Why is there universal excitement over creating excellence and so little passion for sustaining and building upon that clearly present, and for designing and implementing strategies to maximize the unrealized potential inherent in all of us?

Finally, I have long been convinced that excellence in our colleges and universities cannot be attained without strong, creative and effective leadership. While I hold strong feelings about the nature of academic leadership and the characteristics that commonly profile those who enjoy success in these immensely important positions, the topic is simply too extensive to discuss this afternoon and, indeed, forms the basis for a separate, but clearly related presentation. It will have to do to say that without individual excellence, institutional excellence obviously cannot occur. But the excellence of individuals, while essential, is never enough if leadership is deficient.

Let me close with two additional comments about academic excellence. Several times this afternoon I have used sports metaphors to make a point. I have done this because in

sports, most often, there is a clear, prevalent relationship between winning and excellence. We have a few champions and a multitude of also-rans; we have winners and losers; and we associate excellence with the former and mediocrity with the latter. In all such situations, the comparisons involve competition between groups or individuals with little regard for the comparison of myself at my worst with myself at my best. We have carried this mindset and its accompanying metaphors into all aspects of contemporary society, including academia. Thus we talk of our "track record" in competing for external funding; of recruiting a "heavy hitter" in quantum mechanics; of developing a "major league" department of anthropology; and of "winning" any number of academic prizes. Without ignoring the benefits of such outcomes in fostering academic excellence, or arguing for a different metaphor, I'd ask if there are not other views which deserve equal admiration? Professor D. Stanley Eitzen of Colorado State University, in commenting on the dark side of competition in American society, makes a good case for a more individualistic approach in determining the achievement of excellence (Speech delivered at Bethel College, Kansas, September 25, 1989). He also reminds us that winning is seldom important to the perception and reality of our personal excellence. He does this by describing a 200 meter race among three evenly matched 12-year olds at a Special Olympics event. About 25 meters from the finish line, one of the boys fell. The other two runners stopped and helped their competitor to his feet, brushed him off, and jogged together, hand in hand, to the finish line, ending the race in a three-way tie. Like Professor Eitzen, I believe there are important lessons in this poignant story for all of us so enmeshed in the competitive quest for excellence. At the very least, such events should remind us that collaboration and commitment to creating a sense of community

can reinforce important humane values-values that are sorely needed in an academic world increasingly populated by competitors and contenders.

One of the personal benefits of a presentation like this is the opportunity it affords for reflection on how one's convictions concerning academic excellence change over the years. There was a time when I thought of just one or to roads to personal and institutional excellence. And although the excellence I sought always seemed to be beyond the horizon, I envisioned highways that were fairly straight with signposts that were clearly visible and easy to follow. I've now traveled many a mile on this venture and have a broader perspective of the scope and nature of academic excellence and believe there are many roads to get there. I've also observed that the highways and byways are seldom smooth and the signposts can easily mislead the unwary. I've learned that there are perilous twists and turns which, if negotiated at reckless speed, can lead to disaster. And I've experienced the common optical illusion of uphill progress while, in reality, the enterprise was going downhill-sometimes at an alarming rate. Nonetheless, I remain firmly convinced that excellence does indeed lie just over the next horizon or, at worst, the one after that. And, if subsequent events prove me wrong, I'll have few regrets. For in the final analysis, I've come to accept that active involvement in planning and taking the trip is as important and personally rewarding as is the eventual destination.

References

1. Gardner JW. Excellence-Can we be equal and excellent too? New York: Harper & Row, 1961:152.

2. Schmotter JW. Colleges have themselves to blame for the influence of journalistic rankings on their quality. The Chronicle of Higher Educ 1989; (August 16):35

3. 2000 College Rankings. Available from URL: http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/corank.htm

4. Gardner JW. Excellence-Can we be equal and excellent too? New York: Harper & Row, 1961:159.

5. Bennis W. Why leaders can't lead-The unconscious conspiracy continues. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989:86.

6. Yankelovich D. Work and human values. New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1983:22.