At the heart of any university is education. We voluntarily spend four (five) years of our lives and nowadays at UD over $100,000 to acquire some set of knowledge, skills, experiences, and abilities. The university’s Vision 2010 document says that UD’s educational experience is “distinguished by its strong commitment to collaboration and the integration of learning and living within a diverse community,” and that it educates “for adaptation and change, and to develop the whole person.” A UD education enables students to “grow in their faith, pursue lifelong learning, achieve professional success, and contribute through service and leadership to the communities in which they live and work.” If that is the case, Approach #1 says that academic excellence is best achieved by making that educational experience as rigorous, challenging, and meaningful as possible. What happens in the classroom, lab, performance space, and other academic settings should be our foremost concern.

Advocates of this approach suggest that UD’s academic environment could be improved. They point to significant variation among departments and schools in what is expected from students. Some departments have reputations for placing high demands and expectations on their majors, while others have reputations for less rigor. Grade inflation is also a problem. UD faculty are assigning far too many A’s to work that is not truly excellent and not assigning enough C’s and D’s for fair to poor work. They also see the presence of adjunct and part-time faculty in introductory courses as potentially problematic.

To address these and other concerns, a more rigorous and innovative academic environment is necessary. There is no single solution, but proponents of this approach point to a number of changes that could occur regarding the curriculum and faculty. The responsibility for implementing Approach #1 falls primarily on faculty and administrators. Students would also play a role in promoting this community of scholarship.

Curriculum and Coursework

One obvious way to promote greater academic excellence is by demanding more from students—making courses more rigorous. Rigor could mean that professors assign more readings, require more papers, make exams harder and longer, or require more in-class and take-home projects. In short, students would be asked to do more. They would consume and produce more information.

Evidence suggests that aspects of the curriculum are not rigorous enough. Some courses are too easy to begin with or faculty “dumb down” the material because students appear incapable or unwilling to do more. Dr. Pestello shared a recent conversation he had with a new faculty member:

Our new faculty colleague [told] me about a classroom related problem he was having. When he interviewed here in the spring he indicated that he typically assigned 100 to 120 pages of reading per week. No one said anything about that at the time so he began the term by assigning this amount of reading, just as he had done at his previous institution. In the very short time he had been here, however, our students let it be known that his expectations are entirely unreasonable for this university. They informed him that 60 to 80 pages are all he could reasonably expect. He then consulted with a few seasoned UD faculty, and they advised him to scale back his expectations and acquiesce to the students’ expectations.

Proponents of Approach #1 see this faculty member’s experience as representative: too often students are unwilling to work hard and faculty give in to student complaints. The university should work to cultivate a more intellectually challenging environment—one where faculty are supported in pushing their students and where students recognize and appreciate why they are being pushed. Lectures, discussions, readings, projects, and other course work should be intellectually challenging, across the board. Greater rigor should come, according to this approach, in introductory and lower-level courses as well.

Approach #1: Create a More Rigorous and Innovative Academic Environment
This approach also calls on the university to implement and support innovative learning opportunities. Several programs already are in place and provide experiential and integrated learning opportunities within small groups that create close-knit academically focused communities. These include the Honors and Scholars Program, CORE, the New Engineers Program, the Interdisciplinary Summer Study Abroad Program, and other programs. Proponents expect the university to allocate resources in a manner that opens these opportunities to more students. Curriculum should be reformed to better promote academic excellence.

Faculty Issues

To cultivate a more rigorous academic environment, it is critical that UD commit itself to hiring faculty, staff, and administrators who share a commitment to academic excellence. Hiring committees should give careful consideration to how potential hires may foster academic excellence. The university should also encourage current faculty to do all they can to promote a rigorous academic environment.

Accomplishing this may require changing how students evaluate faculty and courses at semester’s end. Some professors say that student evaluations play too much of a role in tenure decisions and pay increases. Professors who offer academically rigorous courses sometimes feel that their job security is at risk because students often penalize them in low student evaluation scores. There is the potential for student evaluations to tap a professor’s popularity and not her rigor. Many students also believe that few course changes come from the current student evaluation process. Therefore, the teaching evaluation process must move beyond student comments and scores to become more holistic. Alternatives include peer evaluations, where faculty evaluate each other, and portfolio evaluations, where faculty submit extensive written reflections on their own teaching.

Another way in which the university could attract and retain faculty who embrace academic excellence is through more rigorous tenure and post-tenure review processes. When a professor is “tenured,” that means she has the job as long as she wants, barring some gross violation or failure. Giving tenure is one way that universities foster academic freedom. It enables faculty to think, speak, and write without fear of censorship or retribution. It also can protect those who offer challenging courses and may assign many C’s or D’s. Thus, tenure is connected to academic excellence. Proponents of Approach #1 insist that tenure be offered only to faculty who show strong records as teacher-scholars—excellence in teaching and research. UD currently tenures 90% of faculty who go up for it. This may seem high, but the university tells tenure-track faculty members each year whether they are progressing successfully toward tenure. Those who are not making progress often leave the university before they are eligible for tenure. Thus, roughly 50% of faculty hired each year will go on to be tenured.

The university could further promote academic excellence among faculty by implementing a more consistent post-tenure review process. UD has a policy for reviewing tenured faculty members, but its use varies from department to department. The university could strengthen the post-tenure process to ensure that those members of the faculty who are tenured continue to pursue and promote academic excellence. It also would enable the university to let go of lackluster faculty members who, despite their tenure, are not excelling in their teaching or research.

A final way in which the university could promote a rigorous academic environment is to decrease the percentage of courses taught by adjunct or part-time faculty. We mean nothing disparaging toward adjuncts or part-time faculty per se. Indeed, there are many courses best taught by someone outside the university. They bring real-world experience and knowledge to the classroom and certainly offer rigorous courses. Our conversations with UD students, however, brought to
light the fact that because adjuncts and part-time faculty teach only a few courses, students are not able to develop meaningful relationships with them. It is also tempting for the university to hire adjunct and part-time faculty to teach lower level courses—courses that may not interest full-time faculty—because it costs less. This has a detrimental effect on the academic environment. The university could commit to lowering the percentage of courses, particularly lower level courses, taught by adjuncts or part-time faculty.

Faculty members have a critical role to play in Approach #1. Proponents of this approach think that faculty must hold students to higher standards and assign grades that students deserve. Some students shape their schedule to accommodate professors and classes known to be “easy A” classes. Academic excellence requires that grades be meaningful. Faculty should not hesitate to fail students who do not fulfill course requirements satisfactorily. A’s should only be given to students who do exemplary work. Proponents might also say that faculty should do less hand-holding. Students need to be responsible for their own academic successes or failures. Faculty who have lax standards, give students multiple chances, and do not hold students accountable for missing classes reinforce bad habits and detract from the educational environment.

"[T]he effectiveness of the evaluations depends on the teacher. If they never consider and respond to negative feedback, it’s a lost cause for the students. ~ Senior UD Student"

---

### 2004 First Year Courses Taught by UD Faculty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Full-Time</th>
<th>Part-Time**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on semester credit hours. All numbers were rounded to the nearest whole number. Data for graduate assistants not reported.

**Excludes administrative/professional/research employees who teach part-time, except for Business because of reporting anomaly.

---

### Trade-Offs with Approach #1

- With increased classroom rigor, some students may be left behind. Though losing some students would be regrettable, proponents of this approach would see this as an unfortunate but necessary price for greater academic rigor.

- Attracting and keeping professors committed to excellence can be costly. Offering more innovative courses and encouraging study abroad programs takes money. If tuition increases are necessary, there is a fear that this could homogenize the student body and we could lose some diversity—only the affluent need apply. Advocates of this approach respond that there are scholarships and loans available for students in need, and that some tuition increases would be accepted if the value of a UD diploma increased.

- Greater rigor also may require students to spend more time on homework and limit their ability to participate in extracurricular activities. Proponents of this approach respond that students will find a new balance between heightened academic rigor and extracurricular activities.
What Critics Say about Approach #1

Critics point to two specific problems with pursuing academic excellence through greater rigor: (1) UD could become elitist, (2) UD could deemphasize its Marianist values.

The Vision 2010 document describes UD as “an innovative leader in higher education” and “as one of the finest Catholic universities in the nation.” This is not what is meant when critics say this approach could foster elitism. Critics are concerned about focusing too much on grades, achievement, and tangible results. We may appear more concerned about impressing graduate schools, employers, and other universities. Further, UD claims to educate the whole person, which means, in part, that education takes place in and out of conventional classrooms. With rigor as the focus, we may lose sight of the settings beyond the conventional classroom where educating the whole person occurs.

Some critics also worry that this approach conflicts, at some level, with the Marianist values of equality, inclusiveness, community, and service to others. The Society of Mary published in 1999 a document that described the five characteristics of Marianist education. The 1999 document says, “In the Marianist approach to education, ‘excellence’ includes the whole person, not just the technician or rhetorician. It also includes people with their curricular and extra-curricular experiences.”

Five Characteristics of Marianist Education

Educate for Formation of Faith:
Includes the dimension of religious faith and formation of character. It calls on individuals to rely at appropriate times and in thoughtful ways on both faith and reason. It integrates the heart and the intellect and a commitment to learning from and serving others.

Provide an Excellent Education:
Strives to educate the whole person, developing their physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social qualities. It integrates theory and practice and enables students and faculty to contemplate and impact the larger world. Conflicting perspectives are welcomed.

Educate in Family Spirit:
Fosters a community, a climate of acceptance, recognizes the communal dimensions of research, teaching, and learning, and calls for effective collaboration.

Educate for Service, Justice, and Peace:
Promotes the common good. The intellectual life is undertaken as a form of service in the interest of justice and peace and the curriculum is designed to connect the classroom with the wider world. Education is ultimately in service to others, the promotion of human dignity, and to a just and peaceful society.

Educate for Adaptation and Change:
Adapts and changes its methods and structures, amidst rapid social and technological change, so that the wisdom of its educational philosophy and spirituality may be transmitted more fully. It also calls for an education that enables people to live authentically in a pluralist society and develop critical thinking skills in the search for truth.
ences, their intellectual and spiritual development, understood and supported best in and through community.” Although Marianist educational philosophy has at its core commitments to excellence, critics do worry that greater focus on academic rigor may diminish our community of learners and encourage students and faculty to learn in isolation. Community learning may give way to individual achievement. In addition, higher expectations for students and faculty may hinder the growth of community.