



Faculty Portrait:

Dr. Hamid Akbari

Professor of Management & Chair of Management and Marketing

Dr. Akbari joined NEIU after receiving his Ph.D. in Management and Organizational Behavior from The Ohio State University. He has been on the faculty of NEIU's Management and Marketing department ever since 1986. Last semester, Dr. Hamid Akbari became the second recipient of the **Audrey Reynolds Distinguished Teaching Award**. He gave a lecture summing up his thoughts on teaching at an event in Recital Hall on April 14. We started our questions with some of the references he made in this lecture.

The following is a summary of Dr. Akbari's responses to our questions.

Parker Palmer points out that “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique... If we want to grow as teachers, we must learn to talk to each other about our inner lives, our own identity and integrity.” How can we have this conversation here at NEIU?

We should make the conversation about teaching a structural feature of our lives as teachers. The College of Business and Management with its One-Book Initiative has done quite well in attracting large numbers of students and faculty and involving them in discussion about key tenets of the chosen book. A similar approach could be useful for discussions about teaching across campus, maybe as occasional brown-bags at the CTL, or held in individual departments to give them more of a departmental flavor.

You mentioned the importance of ethics and social justice in higher education. How should faculty members pursue this in or outside of their classrooms?

One important role of the faculty is to provide service. Too often, this seems to be limited to serving on committees and in faculty governance. When I first came to NEIU, there was more emphasis on community service with faculty participating in local community councils, etc. Maybe this should again play a larger role in the life of a faculty member. It should then also be considered more prominently in tenure and promotion decisions. In addition, we ought to treat the University as a classroom. How are our various disciplines interrelated? How can we together pursue the ultimate goal of education? And the ultimate goal of education is liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. One medium for linking us together can be the Heritage Conferences on our campus; another one might eventually be the new Global Studies Program; and the CTL could also play a role that connects us.

You also referred to Postman & Weingartner's “Teaching as a Subversive Activity.” What lasting value do you attribute to their 40-year old critique of the education system?

The general theme of that book still holds: We live in a democratic society, and therefore it is the task of a faculty member to promote democracy. That requires things such as experimenting with new ideas and using one's imagination. It also includes questioning one's basic beliefs and assumptions... at least to become conscious about what these assumptions are and where they came from.

What's the most important thing about teaching you have learned in your years as a professor?

I have learned what it really means to be student-centered: As a teacher, you are a role model. That implies that you must go beyond satisfying students' needs to acquire knowledge. You must motivate them to be curious. This points toward the *How* of teaching, rather than just the *What*. Many teachers consider only what's going on inside the classroom, but much of what really motivates students to grow happens outside of the classroom. Good teachers encourage students one-on-one to realize their potential. Students need a teacher to be there for them, believe in them, and give them that nudge when things get difficult.

What advice would you give a new faculty member coming to our campus?

New faculty members must understand that they need to acquire this self-understanding of their role outside the classroom!

For better or for worse, what do you see as the most important change in higher education—at NEIU or in general—over the 23 years on which you can look back?

There are at least three big changes that I have observed over the course of my career so far: One is the rise in the importance of assessment. Assessment is important, but it is sometimes also a bit overdone! The second big change is the role technology—in particular online technology—is playing now. In many ways, technology has liberated us to do things we couldn't do before, and we all need to learn to utilize it properly. The third change is that we now have a much more diverse student body at NEIU than we had when I first came here.

If you were President of NEIU, which one thing would you change or do more of?

The President is already doing a lot to provide recognition for faculty. Since we are primarily a teaching institution, I would put even more emphasis on good teachers. One thing we are missing is opportunities for recognizing our newer faculty. They aren't eligible yet for the University's Excellence Awards in the first few years here. There should be something that highlights their early accomplishments on campus.

What should be the role of research and scholarship at a teaching institution such as ours?

Scholarship should support our role as teachers. We should therefore be looking more toward the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Our teaching mission does not call for publications in the most highly-selective journals, but should allow for a wide variety of outlets that are suitable to the NEIU teaching mission.

We have a new Task Force on Gen-Ed, which is bound to bring up big and controversial issues: What are your thoughts about General Education?

Even if you just look at the industrialized countries of Western Europe, Australia, Canada, and the U.S., average participation in 4-year higher education is less than 30% (see *Global Higher Education Report 2005* by the Educational Policy Institute). In a way, that makes every college student exceptional. We should enable the students, who make it to college, to take on responsibilities in their communities and ultimately globally. Therefore, I suggest that any student in this country should take a leadership course and possibly also a course on entrepreneurship in their first two years. And the latter should not be narrowly defined as entrepreneurship in a business sense. Beyond that, I would provide as much flexibility as possible. The more choices students have for taking courses, the better.

Where do you see higher education twenty years from now?

Teaching will change. The movement toward free course materials in any discipline and toward fully-online universities will get bigger. These trends will have a major impact on higher education. Today's faculty need to get involved with this, so that they know what these changes entail and can exercise some control over what is happening with their profession. The online revolution will have a huge impact on higher education sooner rather than later.

The CTL-Bulletin has done three previous Faculty Portraits. You might want to look back at what these other colleagues had to say about their experiences at NEIU: Dr. Harry Hild (Bulletin 39), Dr. Suzanne Benson (Bulletin 46), and Ms. Emily Good (Bulletin 50). Find these Bulletins at: www.neiu.edu/~ctl/.