

A Commitment to Asking the Hard Questions

By PIPER FOGG

Paula Clarke and W. Ted Hamilton Columbia College (Calif.)

Paula Clarke and W. Ted Hamilton say a lot of students try hard to avoid taking their courses. That's because the professors, who are married and teach at Columbia College in Sonora, Calif., have reputations as tough teachers.

"We don't allow them to sit in class and expect infotainment," says Mr. Hamilton, who teaches history, geography, and political science at the two-year college. He and his wife, who teaches sociology and anthropology, hand out final-exam questions at the start of each course, then explain that there will be class dialogue based on the Socratic method. "The minute you stop asking questions," they announce, "the exam is due."

Hardball? Perhaps. But the professors, who themselves attended California's Modesto Junior College, say it is the best way to teach students how to be good students. Many, if not all of them, say Ms. Clarke, have never learned basic reading, writing, or listening skills. She and Mr. Hamilton like to shock students into realizing that those deficiencies should be a cause for alarm.

"People come to community college with limited expectations of what it means to be college students," says Mr. Hamilton. Furthermore, the two professors argue, some of their colleagues reinforce those notions by emphasizing what they call "equal success" for all rather than recognizing the contributions of students who work hard and excel.

Their attitude, they admit, ruffles some feathers. But it has also won them national awards, and they have a book in the works on their teaching philosophy, called "Beyond Tinkering: High Demand x High Support: Challenging Rather Than Accommodating Problems in Higher Education."

They see their jobs as creating a "transformation" in their students. Their goal is not to improve students' self-esteem, but rather to work to increase their competencies, which creates authentic, earned self-esteem. And that, they say, is a more powerful motivator.

To be sure, the professors provide ample guidance and resources along the way, arriving on the campus at 7 a.m. for office hours and coaching students who come for help. They also try to serve as mentors to junior faculty members, urging them to face up to the challenge of transforming their own students.

It will be challenging, they warn, and there will be resistance. Their point is that learning isn't always "fun." It's work. But only work can lead to true accomplishment.