

A Professor at Louisiana State Is Flunked Because of Her Grades

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Jackson Hill for The Chronicle

Dominique G. Homberger, who has taught at Louisiana State U. at Baton Rouge for 31 years, was abruptly removed from her biology courses.

By David Glenn



Ms. Homberger confers with students in her lab.

Baton Rouge, La.

On March 25, Dominique G. Homberger gave an exam to her section of Biology 1001, a large introductory course for nonscience majors at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge.

It was the semester's second exam. On the first one, five weeks earlier, the students had bombed. When Ms. Homberger filed her midterm grades, on March 12, more than 60 percent were failing, and not one student had earned an A.

She never had the chance to find out how much they might improve. When she returned to her lab after giving the second exam, an e-mail message from Kevin R. Carman, dean of basic sciences, was waiting. Because so many students were failing and/or dropping out, he wrote, "I have concluded that it is in the best interests of the students to relieve you of your teaching duties in BIOL 1001."

Zachary Izdepski, a junior who took Biology 1001 with Ms. Homberger, feels she is in the right: "I think the administration made a big mistake with this case."

Kevin R. Carman, dean of basic sciences, was alarmed by the extraordinary number of students failing Ms. Homberger's biology class.

Ms. Homberger, a tenured professor of biology who has taught at Louisiana State since 1979, was pulled from the class, effective immediately. Her section was turned over to E. William Wischusen, an associate professor who coordinates the department's large lecture courses. A few days later, Mr. Wischusen retroactively raised the grades in Ms. Homberger's section, giving each student a 25-point increase on the first exam, on which they had done so badly.

"No one had spoken to me in person about this," she says. "Not the dean, not my department chair."

The move has ignited a battle on the campus. Ms. Homberger and her allies say the dean crossed a line by interfering in a classroom. They also say the incident is a symptom of grade inflation, and they worry that the episode will set a terrible precedent.

But Mr. Carman and other LSU officials are unapologetic. The grade distribution in Ms. Homberger's section was far out of line with the historical pattern in Biology 1001, they say, and a general-education course for nonmajors is not the place for her particular style of tough love. That's also the view of a few of Ms. Homberger's colleagues and former graduate students, who say her methods are actually rigorous to the point of dysfunction.

On an afternoon in late April, a few dozen Biology 1001 students gather outside the lecture hall in advance of class. Timothy Lala, a junior civil-engineering major, says the department was right to remove Ms. Homberger. "It was very tough," he says. "Her tests weren't exactly hard questions. They were just strange. Some of them dealt with things that she'd barely touched on in class."

But another student steps in to defend Ms. Homberger. "I learned a lot from her," says Rebecca C. Maggio, a sophomore majoring in graphic design. "She challenged us to study. I don't think she was unreasonable. I'd say she was very, very thorough."

Ms. Homberger was teaching the course this semester because the department needed an instructor. For most of her time at Louisiana State, her bread and butter as an undergraduate instructor has been "Comparative Vertebrate Anatomy," an upper-level course; she had not taught a large lecture section since 1995.

Students who sign up for Ms. Homberger's anatomy course—in contrast to those who may have wandered into her Biology 1001 section this semester—know exactly what they are getting into. The course has a longstanding reputation for toughness. Of the 21 students who enrolled in anatomy last fall, 13 withdrew. Of the eight who made it to the finish line, three failed, two earned B's, and three earned A's. That has been the typical pattern since 1995, according to university records.

But some students, even those who have struggled, love the anatomy course. "The first time I took the class, I had anxiety well into the semester," says Jill Dowling, a graduating senior who failed the course on her first attempt, then tried again and earned a C. Despite this, Ms. Dowling counts the course as one of her best academic experiences. "You learn how to study. You learn how to keep up," she says. Five other veterans of the course gave similarly glowing accounts to *The Chronicle*.

Mr. Wischusen, the course coordinator who took over Ms. Homberger's section in Biology 1001, says he was pleased when Ms. Homberger volunteered to teach it. He says they had productive conversations before the semester began about how she would approach the material. But he became concerned, he says, when he saw the eccentric format of her daily quizzes and her first exam, which was given on February 18. Ms. Homberger was using multiple-choice questions—but instead of the typical four or five possible answers, she used as many as 10.

"I thought her questions were far more complicated than was actually necessary," Mr. Wischusen says. He also suggests that she was too concerned with testing students' memory of insignificant details. "Professor Homberger and I disagreed about the relative importance of testing facts versus concepts," he says. "Let's just leave it at that." (Go to this article on [chronicle.com](#) for [two examples](#) of Ms. Homberger's test questions.)

Mr. Wischusen never sat in on Ms. Homberger's class. Nor did any other colleague. That is one of the points that most angers Ms. Homberger—that administrators pulled her from the course without looking directly at her classroom. But the course coordinator began to hear complaints from her students early in the semester.

Ms. Homberger's quiz and test questions were too cumbersome, they said—and the questions often dealt with material that had been assigned as reading but never discussed in the classroom. She irked some students because she did not give out detailed study guides for tests, and because she assigned them to read Wikipedia entries on various topics.

The Midterm Fiasco

On March 12, Mr. Wischusen saw the midterm grades in Ms. Homberger's section. Ten days later, he says, he brought his concerns to Mr. Carman, the dean.

"By the time this came to my attention," Mr. Carman says, "there was one week left before the end date for students to withdraw from class. My concern was that there was going to be a large number of additional students leaving."

The attrition rate in Biology 1001 at that moment stood at 21.5 percent, up from 15.9 percent 12 days earlier. It is impossible to know how many more students might have exited before the April 1 withdrawal deadline. "If all of our classes had this kind of attrition rate, we would have a very hard time graduating students from LSU," he says.

He decided that he had to act. After touching base with the provost and chancellor, he sent Ms. Homberger the e-mail message.

Except in cases of gross misconduct, Louisiana State does not have a formal policy for removing instructors from a course midsemester. Mr. Carman does not assert that Ms. Homberger had violated any particular policy, but he says he had the authority to act in order to protect students' interests.

In large, multisection lecture courses, individual instructors at Louisiana State appear to have a certain amount of latitude to set their own grading standards, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of 10 such courses for the period from 2005 to 2009. In economics, all sections of the introductory course have almost identical grade distributions. In a large lecture course in American history, by contrast, there is huge variance. One senior faculty member is stingy with A's, giving them to fewer than 5 percent of his students; one of his colleagues consistently awards 30 percent or more. In any case, every faculty member interviewed for this article said that they knew of no precedents at Louisiana State for disciplining an instructor for grading too harshly.

On March 26, the day after she learned she had been pulled, Ms. Homberger met with Mr. Carman in his office. She told him that she had given the department ample warning that she intended to grade the course rigorously.

She also noted that attrition rates in some other introductory science courses at Louisiana State routinely exceeded 25 percent. (Those are in courses aimed at science majors, so the analogy to Biology 1001 is not perfect.) In the fall of 2009, three sections of introductory chemistry had withdrawal rates higher than 28 percent. So did four sections of calculus and three sections of introductory economics.

Most of all, she argued that her students' grades would have improved. (Their average grade on the second exam, it turned out, was 70. That was 20 points higher than the average on the first exam, but it still left roughly a third of the students on track to fail.)

None of that persuaded Mr. Carman. He said his decision was final.

Ms. Homberger got on the phone with friends in the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Brooks B. Ellwood, a professor of geology and the chapter president, calls her removal one of the most egregious such episodes he can recall at Louisiana State. If instructors are tacitly pressured not to fail too many students, he says, "the good students won't ever get a fair distribution of grades that reflects their good work. And once it gets out that this is something that administrators can do, students will be quicker to complain."

Mr. Ellwood fears this will be the first of many such conflicts. The state of Louisiana is moving toward a system that will allocate funds to public colleges according to their success in improving their retention and graduation rates. Those are worthy goals, Mr. Ellwood says, but they could easily lead to ham-handed efforts to reduce students' failure rates.

Ms. Homberger says she has been flooded with supportive messages from around the country; she forwarded a dozen examples to *The Chronicle*. Finally someone is taking a stand for academic rigor, her correspondents say. Even one of her Biology 1001 students, Zachary Izdepski, a junior majoring in cultural geography, says that "to have professors running scared—it's not a good thing. I think the administration made a big mistake with this case."

Unsupportive Colleagues

But others at Louisiana State say that they aren't entirely surprised. "This talk about 'academic freedom' is nauseating," says James V. Remsen Jr., a professor of biology, in an e-mail message to *The Chronicle*. "It does not apply to what one teaches in core-curriculum courses. LSU students should worship at the altar of Dean Carman."

Mr. Remsen says administrators should have stepped in long ago to improve Ms. Homberger's performance. He notes that during her 31 years at Louisiana State, only a single student has completed a doctorate under her supervision, and that only a handful of students have completed master's degrees. All of her other graduate students have dropped out or transferred to different advisers.

One student who dropped out is Mr. Remsen's ex-wife, Catherine Cummins, who abandoned hope of completing a doctorate with Ms. Homberger during the late 1980s. (She is one of the students to have completed a master's degree.)

Ms. Cummins later earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction at Louisiana State and now teaches at a laboratory school affiliated with the university. "At one point I really considered Dominique like a sister," she says. "I identified with her feminism and her determination to make it as a woman in science."

But she says she became frustrated with Ms. Homberger's methods, both in the laboratory and in her undergraduate courses, where Ms. Cummins sometimes worked as a teaching assistant.

"She would assign articles from offprint collections, from *Scientific American* and other magazines," Ms. Cummins says. "For 18-, 19-year-old kids, these were pretty high-level reading. And then, on her tests, there might be a question about the caption on one of the figures in those articles—something very, very detailed. Students would complain and she would answer, 'Did you have to read that? Well, then, you should know it.'" A second graduate student, a contemporary of Ms. Cummins, gave *The Chronicle* a similar account.

In reply, Ms. Homberger says that she believes she does, in fact, adjust the style and content of her teaching to particular audiences. "There is no denying that some students really dislike my teaching and me as a person," she says. "But others like me very much, and one should always consider the source."

As for the paucity of doctorates that have emerged from her lab, Ms. Homberger says there is a long and complex history. In the early 1990s, she says, she was involved in a plagiarism dispute with a former graduate student. A university committee ultimately exonerated her, she says, but ever since then, certain colleagues have discouraged students from studying with her. In any case, she says, the issue is irrelevant to this semester's dispute.

"There are plenty of professors who have graduated only one Ph.D. student and can be proud of their accomplishments," she says. "I do not see how this can be construed as a negative."

Paradoxically, defending every faculty member's freedom to set his or her own grading policies—a principle that Ms. Homberger asserts—might actually exacerbate the culture of grade inflation that she decries. In a world with complete autonomy in grading, many faculty members might take the easy road and let their grades drift higher. And departments would find it hard to establish norms about what students should learn.

Partly because of that paradox, Louisiana State's Faculty Senate has decided to wait until the fall before passing any resolutions related to the Homberger matter. Over the summer, its executive committee plans to draft revisions of the university's formal rules about grading. Among other things, they want to reach a consensus about how much autonomy instructors should have when they teach sections of large introductory courses.

Meanwhile, Ms. Homberger awaits the outcome of a grievance she has filed with the university. "I'm doing the right thing," she says. "I can turn around and tell the students that they really should learn, that they really should study. And I think this is an enormous success. But look where it got me."

Comments

1. cpri2405 - May 17, 2010 at 09:16 am

"There is no denying that some students really dislike my teaching and me as a person," she says. "But others like me very much, and one should always consider the source."

This statement combined with the other quoted sources reveals that Prof. Homberger elicits strong positive and negative opinions from both colleagues and students. While it seems like this situation was handled badly by the administration, faculty who are polarizing in this way tend to not be the best teachers or colleagues. If you can't get past the person teaching or researching, the content tends to be lost on everyone except the privileged few who "get" her approach. Essentially, she prunes her classes so that that the only students she has to teach are those who she prefers to teach. I am shocked they put her back into a large class again after a 15 year hiatus.

2. rpurser - May 17, 2010 at 11:56 am

The actions on the part of Mr. Carman, the Dean in this case, are appalling. The fact that over 46% of students in her class were receiving passing grades (71 and above) on Exam 2 shows that Prof. Homberger was just a tough teacher. Does that justify pulling a tenure professor out of a course mid-stream? I am sure we all know colleagues that are very tough, hold high standards, are demanding--should we just pull them out of the classroom when their grade distributions drop or differ from their colleagues who inflate grades and are more interested in popularity than academic rigor? And the fact that nobody observed her class? Oh, and heaven forbid that 18 and 19 year olds would be asked to read a popular press magazine as Scientific American!

3. cdrlumpy - May 17, 2010 at 12:08 pm

Shocking, Shocking that the administration would put her back in the large class after 15 years. That was done purposefully. The administration knew that she would not change her teaching style and could capitalize on the student compliants in order to remove her. I imagine she is tenured faculty; so in order to remove her, the administration needed justification which she provided, although weak. Politics is politics.

The other issue is the expectation of students that the course should be easy and the grade inflation associated with this expectation. As Dean Wormer said, "Fat, Dumb and Stupid is no way to go through life". This expectation of ease is pervasive within the US and abhorred internationally. International students at US graduate schools with children in tow, those international children attending US Public Schools must repeat the highest grade completed after returning to their country's own school system. Switzerland is famous for implementing that requirement. That is what the world thinks of US Public Schools in this day and age.

If this grade inflation continues, the world's opinion of the US Institutions of Higher Learning, will be as low as their opinion of US public schools of education.

4. millerdb - May 17, 2010 at 12:40 pm

Were it not May, I'd swear this story had to be an April Fool's joke. Sadly, it's for real, as "unreal" as it sounds. Aside from the administrative intrusion into classroom affairs, there are statements in the article that are indicative of a very sad state of affairs in University education at this institution (and, perhaps many others):

1. In commenting on other courses at LSU, the reported refers to a professor being "stingy with A's, giving them to fewer than 5 percent of his students; one of his colleagues consistently awards 30 percent or more." Grades (whether they be As, Bs, Cs, Ds, or Fs) are not "given" or "awarded." They are EARNED. At the very most, a professor ASSIGNS whatever grade is EARNED. Thus, there is no valid concept of "stingy" or not-stingy. This mentality about the source of grades is truly unfortunate. Maybe high schools are partially to blame; maybe not.

2. A student who dropped out of Professor Homberger's class claims that articles from Scientific American and other magazines (that Prof. Homberger assigned) are "pretty high-level reading" for 18 and 19-year olds. I don't know what the other "magazines" might have been, but magazines are not scientific journals. Scientific American articles are written for the intelligent layperson. If somebody is seemingly intelligent enough to be admitted to a major research university like LSU, that person should be expected to be able to comprehend a newsstand magazine's content that complements the material in a course in which the student is enrolled.

5. 11886649 - May 17, 2010 at 01:01 pm

If an individual student flunks my class, it is clearly his or her fault. But if the vast majority of my class fails my exams, then it is clearly my fault. All that talk about being tough and having high demands and standards in the classroom is just a cop-out. As the professors, we are responsible for teaching. Ms. Homberger's grade distribution clearly shows that she did not do her job properly.

6. bag31050 - May 17, 2010 at 01:26 pm

The actions of the Department Chair and Dean are frightening to another gray haired 30 plus years of teaching tenured professor. I to consider myself a rigorous professor that uses the concept approach as apposed to the fact approach, but I would not volunteer to teach a large section. That the administration can step in and change the grades of a professor has long been a taboo under academic freedom.

This article indicates that the assault on Academic Freedom is increasing and the need for rigor early in academics is becoming outdated. This statement says it all "The state of Louisiana is moving toward a system that will allocate funds to public colleges according to their success in improving their retention and graduation rates. "

As Mel Brooks stated "We have to save our phony baloney jobs here gentlemen".

2009 Graduation-Rates Data from the NCAA Data for LSU taken from at www.NCAA.org
All Students 59%

7. 7738373863 - May 17, 2010 at 01:37 pm

This situation never should have happened. Everything points to a faculty member who has been in decline for some time: no publications for seven years, few or no graduate students in her lab, and I would guess very little sponsored research funding, given those staffing and productivity rates. Add to these factors an administrator assigning her to teach a large lecture course that Dr. Homberger has not taught in fifteen years, a course that fulfills a general education requirement for nonmajors, and this is a trainwreck in the making. And the trainwreck is then compounded by the unilateral action of the administration in removing her from the course without so much as a conversation on the subject.

Without a fair, humane, and effective system of post-tenure review, given the graying of the American professoriate, the frequency of incidents such as the present one will only increase going forward. And the administrators who intervened in this matter don't have the foggiest notion of how to institute and administer such a system, given their obvious disrespect for due process as a component of academic freedom.

8. dgle6511 - May 18, 2010 at 08:43 am

Three replies to yesterday's comments:

1) To 7738373863: Where did you get the idea that Ms. Homberger has had no publications for seven years? She was the lead author of a paper in the Journal of Anatomy last year, and she has co-authored several papers in the FASEB Journal. I don't know how her recent publication record compares to her colleagues', but it's not zero.

I should also say that I met two doctoral students in Ms. Homberger's lab who, for what it's worth, seemed to be thriving. (But she also told me that as recently as two or three years ago, another grad student became unhappy and left her lab "in the middle of the night.")

2) To millerdb -- this is not a hostile question; I'm just curious. How far are you willing to carry your argument about students' role in earning grades? Imagine the following scenario:

DEPARTMENT CHAIR: Professor Easy, your colleagues and I have some concerns about your grades. You're giving more than 80 percent of your students A's. That's far above the norm for the course, and as far as we can tell they aren't learning any more than the students in the other sections. We don't think you're being stingy enough with A's.

PROFESSOR EASY: Grades (whether they be As, Bs, Cs, Ds, or Fs) are not "given" or "awarded." They are EARNED. At the very most, a professor ASSIGNS whatever grade is EARNED. Thus, there is no valid concept of "stingy" or not-stingy. This mentality about the source of grades is truly unfortunate. Maybe high schools are partially to blame; maybe not.

How should the department chair reply?

3) I'm afraid I did Catherine Cummins a disservice in the way that I presented her comment about Scientific American. The verbatim quote is correct, but her point was *not* that it was unreasonable to assign readings from Scientific American (and Nature, and other magazines on the cusp between scholarly literature and popular journalism).

Her point was that these were reasonably dense texts, -- maybe slightly more difficult than the textbooks the students were used to in high school -- AND that Ms. Homberger asked extremely detailed questions about small points from the readings.

Are Ms. Homberger's questions unreasonably detailed? Judge for yourself. Here are two examples:
<http://chronicle.com/article/Try-a-Homberger-Test/65566/>

David Glenn

9. mosbor1 - May 18, 2010 at 02:39 pm

Professor in decline?

As members of the Homberger lab, we would like to correct the misconception that Dr. Homberger is not fulfilling her duties as a researcher, teacher, professional and mentor. Since the late 70's, Dr. Homberger has received much financial support for her research, including several NSF grants. She is currently collaborating in NIH funded research. Not only has she published 19 articles since 2000, she published two major manuscripts in the Journal of Anatomy in 2009 and several more are in progress. She also has several textbooks to her credit. Her teaching repertoire is diverse, including both graduate and undergraduate courses. She currently holds 2 editorships and serves on several editorial boards of

professional journals and organizes national and international symposia. Also, she is a fellow in the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science), the AOU (American Ornithological Union), and AWIS (Association for Women in Science). She holds officerships in local, national, and international professional organizations.

A misconception of special concern to us, is the one regarding how Dr. Homberger interacts with her students and colleagues. In addition to a lab full of undergraduate honors research students (many of whom would like to continue their work in the lab as graduate students), there have been several visiting post-docs, graduate students and scientists. Thus, the lab is an exciting and diverse place where, with the spirit of collaboration, we study everything from lampreys to humans. Although it is demanding and challenging at times, the three of us current doctoral students are happily working in Dr. Homberger's lab and have no intentions of leaving before graduation. We appreciate and embrace the challenges and the valuable lessons that she presents to us.

Proudly Homberger doctoral students,
Michelle L. Osborn, Brooke A. Hopkins, and Jonathan A. Bonin

10. _perplexed_ - May 18, 2010 at 07:57 pm

I think it apparent from the example items that the test was designed to fail as many students as possible. Someone with Ms. Homberger's experience must have known how students would perform on items of this kind. What were her motives?

11. erc38 - May 18, 2010 at 08:25 pm

she was a terrible instructor. judging from the questions she used to evaluate students, she is obsessed with gotcha questions that reference nothing other than factoids. The contents appeared to be totally devoid of analytics and theory. After completing her course, how would someone benefit? He or she might remember that foxes in captivity have white stars on their foreheads. Who cares? She is absorbed by all of the trees and has totally lost site of the forest.

12. teacherspaddle - May 19, 2010 at 08:25 pm

Defenders of this instructor present a false dichotomy: support dumbing-down tactics and grade-inflation, or defend tough teaching. However, it is quite possible to be a rigorous teacher with high expectations and a tough grader, and yet still design strong and challenging exams. I imagine the majority of us do this regularly; my tests reward those who demonstrate strong critical thinking, nuance, innovative reasoning, analytical aptitude, comprehension, ability to apply and synthesize ideas... Not mere rote memorization.

The administration may have handled her assignment and removal poorly, but that does not excuse an instructor so obsessed with gatekeeping that she cannot admit her own limits as an instructor and realize she needs better assessment tools.

13. plottel - May 20, 2010 at 05:57 am

The huge number of students failing the course indicates that the instructor failed to teach her subject effectively. How to make science accessible to non-majors and the average undergraduate surely deserves further scrutiny.

14. beveridge - May 20, 2010 at 06:20 am

As a chair of a large department, I have been in the position of leaning on instructors who grade too hard, as well as some that grade too easily. I would have moved aggressively, if I had an instructor, who had a grade curve as far out as Prof. Homberger. If the Biology department wants to change their standards, that is a collective not individual decision.

It is obvious from this that Prof. Homberger is a "wack job," more interested in exercising her own ego in showing she knows more than her students, rather than in teaching them. LSU did the right thing. These sorts of situations make it harder to defend tenure. Obviously, she is also a problem in anatomy, but since that is not really core any more to bio, and has relatively low enrollment, they just "let her rip." It appears not to be a required course.

15. acobas - May 20, 2010 at 08:04 am

People blame immigration, Obama, Bush etc...why America is falling behind...just look at how we treat students going to college. Oh it is too tough...sorry when you get out, life is tough. You earn everything in life. If anything the recent debacle of our economy proves is that we are becoming people of entitlement and not of earners. I wonder where we would be if the generation asked to defend America in the 1940's believed that they were entitled not to fight. This is a joke and it makes LSU look more like a For-Profit than an educational institute of higher learning. When did America become so soft?

16. cleverclogs - May 20, 2010 at 08:16 am

Is LSU also stepping in to remove all the easy or otherwise crap professors from their courses? Since this action against Prof Homberger was generated by student complaints and not by a more responsible independent audit, I'm guessing not.

I think we can safely say two things about LSU:

1) They are more concerned about classes that are too hard than about classes that are too easy.

2) They handled this very badly (in an almost hysterical but certainly reactionary way). They should have let the prof finish the course, to see where the students ended up and what her evals were like. Perhaps her class has a learning arc that was destroyed by her removal midstream. If, after the semester grades came in, student complaints were well founded, LSU could retroactively scale them.

Very poor.

17. 11194062 - May 20, 2010 at 08:23 am

One of the problems cited for Prof Homberger is that she has only graduated on doctoral student? If you've been paying attention to the debates about the overabundance of doctorates and the resulting difficulty in getting adequate employment for those graduates (a problem in the sciences as well as the humanities), Prof Homberger should be a hero for keeping her finger in the dike.

18. ksuenglish - May 20, 2010 at 08:27 am

The grades and dropouts are warning signs. But the administrators -- course coordinator and dean -- seem to me to have been woefully inept in simple data collection and procedure. The story indicates that 1) no one observed the classroom; 2) no one spoke with Prof. Homberger prior to removing her from the course.

Writing good multiple choice exams is actually very hard to do. The fact that so many students were failing does NOT indicate that she's necessarily poor at delivering material, challenging students to learn, etc. It may simply indicate that she's terrible at writing exams (whether there's a malicious motive, as some have indicated, might come clear in actual discussion with her).

Administrators do have an obligation to protect students from poor or erratic teaching and assessment. They also have an obligation, I believe, to insist on professional development opportunities to improve teachers' effectiveness.

19. goldenrae9 - May 20, 2010 at 09:05 am

I work at an insitution where we have a science requisite with similiar grade distribution. I see students often studying 40 hours per week for this course, while letting other course work go and still end up with scores around the mean of 25. There is also some interesting affects on our higher risk students.

When large groups of students are failing, I firmly believe it is the fault of the professor and not the students. I clearly remember a Bio Prof who was considered a gem of my undergrad institution who took full responsibility for 3/4 of the class failing a genetics test and adjusted the grades appropriately (and there was no grade inflation). As an educator I believe the same. It's not about the footnotes--it's about ensuring that students are taught the appropriate knowledge to make them successful in their future path.

However, Ms. Homberger should have been observed and this could have been handled better.

20. timnichols1956 - May 20, 2010 at 09:20 am

The grade distribution in one specific class cannot reasonably be the measure of a professor's "toughness," or "fairness," or any other characteristic. It really is possible that a particular class has been populated by a greater-than-average percentage of unprepared or unmotivated students. A few years ago I had students "number off" one through six in order to "randomly" assign them to groups of three and four for a class exercise. When one of the groups began to work one of the students declared, "Hey! We're all Hindu!" Upon investigation I learned that it was apparently true that only Hindus and all of the Hindus in the class landed in the randomly-assigned group. Over the past 21 years I have observed that I sometimes have classes in which the students respond in ways that others in the same course over many years have not. The comparison with previous and future sections of the course taught by this and other professors is only reasonable if repeated and replicated.

Also, we cannot reasonably judge the fairness of a multiple-choice test or quiz containing more than the traditional four or five possible answers unless we have participated in the lectures and reading assignments, read the syllabus, heard the instructions regarding preparation for them, and otherwise experienced what the students experienced.

Poor performance on a first and/or second test in a semester may be the most important learning experience of the course, leading to better study habits for life. To rob students of that experience by removing the professor is not in the students' best interest.

21. pchoffer - May 20, 2010 at 09:23 am

Folks: Off and on, I've taught large sections of the entry level American history survey course since 1970. I've had colleagues teaching the same course whose drop out rate was close to Dr. Homberger's, and more than half of whose students failed their first exam. None of these gents were removed from the classroom and reassigned because of this. There must be a back story here.

I know that exams can be framed to scare students. But her exams simply needed a little tinkering to be less frightening. Simply ask the same kind of question with four answers (GRE and SAT model). I'd bet that the grades would jump at least a full letter. A curve is also a possible remedy, although giving everyone 25 more points (a 1/4 gift on the basis of a 100 point exam) is not a legitimate curve if the grades are clumped together.

At the same time, I am not sure what harm Dr. Homberger has suffered. I pleaded to get out of teaching the large sections (most often unsuccessfully). They are a beast to teach, even with graders or section leaders. If the public obliquity is the real harm, then the Chronicle is more to blame than her dean.

All best, Peter

22. tuxthepenguin - May 20, 2010 at 09:27 am

"Their average grade on the second exam, it turned out, was 70."

So in other words, she was teaching the class for the first time in many years, scores on the first exam were low, and they removed her? Without even observing the class or talking to her?

There's a lot more that could be said, but that one sentence alone speaks to the absolute nature of the dean's incompetence.

I also found this to be troubling: "...the questions often dealt with material that had been assigned as reading but never discussed in the classroom. She irked some students because she did not give out detailed study guides for tests, and because she assigned them to read Wikipedia entries on various topics."

I plead guilty to all of those sins, with the exception of having to read Wikipedia (but - gasp - I do require outside reading).

23. saswriter - May 20, 2010 at 10:00 am

This brings to mind the story of a friend's son. He graduated as valedictorian from his high school and went on to Johns Hopkins just three years ago. When I asked how he was doing during his first semester, my friend told me her son had been happy to get a C on one of his first science tests, since most of the students had failed it.

Then again, that's Johns Hopkins, right?

However, back in the early '80s, when I was in journalism school at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I "earned" F's on a few early stories written on deadline, in class, for my introductory newswriting class. What a tough, curmudgeonly teacher I had! Unfair!

I was so relieved to earn a B for the class.

Thank God for him.

24. collegeboard - May 20, 2010 at 10:07 am

Without any doubt, what she did is much harder than what the rest of professors in that university, or elsewhere, do, when it comes to rigor in student assessment. Scaling of results not only is unfair, but it contributes in increasing of already huge inflation of less and less valued diplomas and college degrees.

25. kwheaton - May 20, 2010 at 10:12 am

Scientific American is "pretty high level reading?"

26. glackey - May 20, 2010 at 10:13 am

The end (formally...) to real standards and real pedagogy...unfortunately, we are all too familiar with the trend. Let me respond in a language the students will perhaps understand: OMG!

27. lantanatx - May 20, 2010 at 10:23 am

After looking at the questions it is clear some intervention as needed - but this was grossly mishandled by the chair and dean. I personally would love to audit the class - it sounds interesting - but I think the professor could use some coaching on teaching lower division gen ed courses. However the failure of the chair, dean or any other administrator to attend the lectures and offer assistance before removing the professor from the classroom is clearly a much larger failure in leadership up the entire ladder. If the course had been observed, improvement suggestions made in positive manner and the professor still refused to modify the course, then the removal might be justified

As for the complaint that they are picky points from captions of figures, I disagree. First they are all discussed in the text, and secondly the meat of all scientific papers - both technical and non-technical, is generally in the figures/tables. However most non-major students are not going to know that and need specific coaching in how to read even a laymans article in American Scientist or Scientific American.

28. emduggan - May 20, 2010 at 10:36 am

Academe is struggling with their journey from 'we are not a business' to 'we have a product, consumers, and education is a business'.

Policies that exist for all parties need to be updated to meet this new environment. In business, there would be a process of conversations, warnings, and a plan with an individual. This process would be honored with the least productive employee.

Much like the medical community where pharmaceutical companies marketed to the end-user to self-diagnosis and demand prescriptions from their physicians; a similar landscape has erupted in higher education. Physicians were not properly prepared for patient-driven care, nor are faculty prepared for the shift in student-driven (interactive) education. A painful shift in either case, but a needed change to 'how it used to be'.

Although disturbing, it has brought students to this Chronicle blog addressing faculty issues - thus the shift. Hopefully, academe will seek new policies and processes to prevent drastic actions, such as those reported by David Glenn.

29. 22097984 - May 20, 2010 at 10:50 am

According to the chart in the CHE article above, 77.1% of LSU students receive a grade of C or better. Grade inflation like this; well, now that should offend the Dean. If LSU is not careful, its standards will be as low as schools in the Ivy League.

What we have is a culture in which a failure by students to perform to a standard the teacher wants is handled by removal of the teacher. Sadly, these students will soon leave college to find out that their boss has standards too and he/she will not be removed because they complain. Instead, they will be fired.

LSU is doing the students no favors by this action.

30. bfrank1 - May 20, 2010 at 10:57 am

Ah, LSU -

"Our worth in life will be thy worth, we pray to keep it true,
And may thy spirit live in us, forever LSU."

In the old days, the comp.anat. course was the "Three Minute Mile" for pre-med hopefuls, and the "Golden Gopher" who taught it was feared and worshipped across campus as the man with the key to your future - one you had to wrest from him like in some Grimms's fairy tale. Or maybe

Beowulf. So this person is just the continuation of a great tradition at the Ol War Skule. As are the Machiavellian hijinks. Incompetent or deliberate? If it works, why not both? The sad part of all this is that LSU has always waged these internecine conflicts on the backs of hapless students. But it is not alone in that proclivity.

31. mmeers - May 20, 2010 at 11:33 am

Resolved: Wherein the administration of LSU failed to ensure due process for the faculty member... Whereas the course coordinator acted outside of his/her authority... Whereas the Chair of the Department apparently failed to investigate... Whereas the Dean, upon being made aware of the above failures then failed to... We the faculty members of the LSU Faculty Senate do hereby call for the resignation of...

...just trying to help the Senate get a headstart on drafting a resolution for the Fall. Good luck faculty of LSU. You're going to need it if this is what your administration thinks of you.

32. goodeyes - May 20, 2010 at 12:16 pm

In sports, if the team doesn't do well, the coach works to improve performance. If the team continues to do poorly, the coach is fired. In Academia, the students are blamed for poor performance (the players) and the faculty member (the coach) is blameless.

Yes, there can be grade inflation. But too often, poor student grades are a reflection of poor teaching. What as a professor are you doing to help your students succeed?

I feel the Dean was right to remove this woman from the classroom. I hope the only travel funds she receives next year is to go to a conference on how to teach effectively.

33. physicsprof - May 20, 2010 at 12:38 pm

Yes, #34, but in sports if an athlete does not perform to the coach's standards the athlete is sent to a minor league. Would you argue for a similar thing in Academia?

34. tonycontento - May 20, 2010 at 01:02 pm

I don't believe in curves, but I offer extra credit. The extra credit that I offer for large lecture classes includes: attendance, writing assignments, weekly online discussions, and topical community service/volunteering; all optional.

What I have discovered is that without the extra credit, I have a bell-curve distribution biased towards C-/D+ grades. With the extra credit, I have a near perfect Guassian distribution. All of the assignments are topical, but designed to encourage students to dig deeper and seek out resources besides lecture and text.

I won't give out free points to a student, just because they are "close" to the next letter grade. But I provide them with extra credit from the first day, detailed in the syllabus.

Now, does that make me a poor teacher because my students perform below average on exams? Does that mean I am padding grades because I offer extra credit, even though those points still require extra work? Would it be better if all of my students received As or Bs?

We aren't doing our students any service by padding their grades. In the real world, "getting a C" means that you're second to go during a downsizing. Only A & B students keep their jobs (or C- students whose Dad had the job 8 years before they got there).

35. timnichols1956 - May 20, 2010 at 01:13 pm

Also, #34, would you suggest that only those students who have already demonstrated proficiency in the subject be permitted to take those classes? If I could select only those students with a history of proficiency in the subject and recruit only from among those I've seen "play" well, then I couldn't fail. Instead we take students who don't know the subject, but often don't seem to know that they don't know and are not prepared to learn. What coach would tolerate a player who comes to practice with no intention to put forth the effort to improve? The coach can only produce a winning team when he or she has the ability to remove such players from the team without being blamed for the failure of the players who would not perform.

36. timnichols1956 - May 20, 2010 at 01:14 pm

Above, #34 refers to goodeyes. The numbers are changing.

37. iduhpres - May 20, 2010 at 01:55 pm

Ahh how we faculty types forget so easily the days we struggled with learning and horrible teachers. Do any of us recall the faculty who never should have been let into a classroom- yes. Do we recall unfair tests and quizzes - yes. Do we recall our thoughts of wanting the teacher gone - yes? Paper Chase movie Kingsfield anyone?

She should not have been teaching -yes. The school should not have put her in tyhe classroom -yes. Some students will not do well - yes. The administration should not have just pulled her without consultation yes - yes. But then what are we to do with her? If she is overly harsh and dismissive of students as are so many faculty who hide behind their claims of just being tough, what do we do with her or him or them? Do we just let them teach and hurt students not just with grades but a poor knowledge of the subject? Do we allow poorly drawn, poicky and irrelevant questions to count as a fair exam? (and god they were horrid and unfair. You try taking the tests and see how you do.)

So what are we to do with her and him and them? Part of the problem is that we have forgotten that the University is not for us. It is for the students. The public supports (weakly yes) higher education because it is supposedly educating its sons and daughters. But we think the University is not for them but for our research and our freedom to treat students poorly. Her exams were maltreating students. We are not there to fail them but to improve them. Her sense that it is okay to fail students when it is her methods that are failing is simply wrong and mean. We are not there to weed out those who are not good enough but to make them better. We are not there to determine who is not good enough for my class and brilliance. Just as the poor teachers who we had should not have been in the classroom when we were students, she and others like her should not be there.

It is not our goal to recruit the very best students but to make the students we recruit the very best they can be.

It is not our role to weed out non-college material but to turn weeds into flowers by nurturing and proper feeding not using tests like RoundUp.

She was doing neither and should not have been in the classroom. The administration blew it yes but leaving her there would have blown it for many, many students.

Nealr@GReatServiceMatters.com

38. maxwellaustin - May 20, 2010 at 02:28 pm

Does anyone know of opinion surveys or research that has been done soliciting judgments about grade distribution / grade inflation with the following (or similar) groups delineated among respondents?

- a) administrators / educational consultants
- b) education faculty (Ed.D.s)
- c) social science faculty
- d) humanities faculty
- e) science faculty
- f) students

In my experience I have found that there are particularly sharp differences about this issue, with groups a) through c) often ranged in opposition to groups d) and e).

39. shiksha - May 20, 2010 at 02:56 pm

So let me get this straight: Students and their families are paying exorbitant tuitions and racking up many thousands of dollars of debt, and yet incompetent/ineffective/unresponsive/old/tired/lazy (select the word of your choice) faculty members are untouchable.

Insanity! This bubble (tenure) has to burst -- and it will, it is starting to happen.

40. the_book123 - May 20, 2010 at 03:07 pm

What a tangled web? There are academically challenged students? There "bad" professors who do not know how to teach and test students? There ill-prepared administrators who set the institution on fire?

Everyone wants to eat his/her cake and still have it! There are real lessons to learn from this episode. Are there professors who intentionally or unintentionally fail students? Are there whinning and underprepared students? Could university administrators benefit from periodic leadership retraining?

Now, it your turn to make call on the interwoven issues confronting academic institutions. "Grades for the _____; Athletics for the _____; and Sex for the _____".

41. 22122488 - May 20, 2010 at 03:19 pm

This tragic story points to the need to recognize the special demands in the teaching of non-science majors. A brilliant scientist, does not necessarily make a good teacher. It is one thing to teach science majors but it does not always follow that one can do just as good a job in teaching non-science majors. Anyone who teaches non- science students, on top of everything else, has to deal with students who may be indifferent or even fearful of science. Teach science in exactly the same way by placing the same demands as if you were teaching science majors and you cause more damage than good. This is what may have happened in the case of this story. What is the use of a good grade if the student ends up hating the very subject for which he/she got an A or a B? With the right approach we can teach good science to non-science students successfully. The extra gift such teachers have is the ability to transform fear or indifference into confidence and an understanding that brings forth inspiration and awe about nature and the cosmos.

This problem could have been avoided if administrators recognized the fact that NOT every good scientist can do a good job in teaching science to non -science students. It is important to identify those qualified teachers who have those special qualities and assign them to those classes. Mismatching teachers to the wrong group can make students very unhappy, scarring them for life on matters of science. Let us remember that the science course they are taking could very well be their very last taste of science at the college level. Can we afford to send students out into society with a bitter experience or hatred of science? If we do - then we have failed as teachers and as an institution.

42. shiksha - May 20, 2010 at 03:55 pm

At 40: Academically challenged students flunk out. Poor administrators are fired. The only untouchable is the tenured prof. No matter how bad, nothing can be done to them and they know it.

43. mabeelrc - May 20, 2010 at 04:10 pm

What a bunch of babies! Students do NOT need detailed study guides. Study guides are simply a variation of that age old plea: "Tell us what's going to be on the test." Well, college students are (or should be) adults and capable of understanding that ANYTHING and EVERYTHING assigned out of class (technical term for that is HOMEWORK) or covered in class might be on the test. That means ANYTHING and EVERYTHING: lecture, assigned reading, lab. ANYTHING and EVERYTHING. What's with the Wikipedia complaints? Is Wikipedia too hard for them? Carman should be ashamed for rolling over to the lazy students' demands.

44. mabeelrc - May 20, 2010 at 04:30 pm

The fact that there even is such a thing as a biology course for nonscience majors at LSU is a cop out. Biology is biology; the basics are the basics. Let's call the course what it is--biology dumbed down. It makes as much sense as having a course in multiplication for nonmathematics majors. Folks, you've got to learn your multiplication tables whether you are a math major or not. Deal with it. Ms. Homberger's only sin was that she was trying to actually teach some biology to some university students--a course they all signed up for.

45. xhros - May 20, 2010 at 05:09 pm

Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't this a science class for non science majors? Why grade harshly if it's just a class they are required to take because it's part of gen ed? That's like asking a student who is taking a computer programming class because it's part of the gen ed to write an intricate program when they have absolutely no knowledge of programming whatsoever. I'm sorry but I agree with their decision to remove her. They aren't science majors, back off!

46. millerdb - May 20, 2010 at 05:36 pm

David:

Sorry I haven't replied sooner to your questions/comments regarding my comment. I don't usually monitor these discussions and, indeed, only contribute when I feel passionate about an issue, such as this one.

So, let me address your questions now, and, in so doing, let me further identify my background. I am the Associate Dept. Head and Coordinator of Undergraduate Studies in the largest academic Department at a Research Extensive (Carnegie designation) university. Additional to that, I teach a large (300+) student freshman-level course every semester, along with another upper-division course, and I've been doing this since 1980. So, that's my background.

In your comment, you posit an interesting scenario and ask me how far I'd be willing to carry my argument about students EARNING grades, rather than instructors "giving" (or some synonym) grades to students. In this scenario, you are indicating that the Dept. Chair is asking me about about why I a giving A's to more than 80% of my students, and that the Head is concerned about me not being stringent enough. And, in my reply in your scenario, I am stating what I stated in my initial comment to this discussion about me not GIVING anything, but, rather, students EARNING grades. OK. Then, you ask me how the Dept. Head should reply to my reply.

Since, in my administrative role, I am very much involved in these sorts of scenarios along with my Dept. Head, I must say we've never seen anything close to this. The closest we've come happens to be in one of my own upper-division courses in which almost 50% of a class of 130 earned As last Fall. Indeed, I was a little concerned about how this might be viewed--not so much by my Dept. Head who I keep abreast of things like this and why they are happening, but, rather, of Deans/Associate Deans who I do not keep abreast. So, I decided to be proactive and send emails to these upper-level administrators explaining the nature of the course, the fact that it was very demanding (so much so that student were complaining throughout the semester), yet, despite that, coupled with my notoriety on our campus for giving very difficult exams, that students had to be learning a great deal in this course (in which I never curve grades) to achieve this level of performance. So, not only was there no problem, but I've been asked to give workshops on teaching/learning strategies for other instructors.

So, how DID my Dept. Head actually reply? He was so impressed that he forwarded my email to him to upper-level administrators. I guess I have the benefit of having a reputation on campus of being a challenging professor, but, my sense is that Dr. Homberger is in a similar situation.

You then make the point about possibly having misrepresented a quote in your article to which I referred about Scientific American articles, etc. THANK YOU so much for clarifying that. I greatly appreciate it and as a former article of research news items on a popular web site and editor of a scientific journal, I fully understand that sometimes it's possible to have statements misrepresented. So, as you state, the correct statement had to do with the "dense" text of Scientific American (and similar) articles in relation to tradition textbook and the student's interpretation that the exam questions involving those items were extremely detailed involving small points in those articles. Interesting. Since I wrote my comment, I went back to the Chronicle web site and noticed a posting of some of these exam items. The one I looked at just happened to involve an article that I assign in my Animal Behavior course from, not Scientific American, but, rather, American Scientist, which is a journal from the Society of Sigma XI. I'd rank it slightly above Scientific American in it's degree of sophistication, but still below what a scientist would call a "scientific journal." Its distribution is much less extensive than that of Scientific American, but I have actually seen it at places like Borders. Anyway, I was very comfortable evaluating her questions from this article, since I ask questions about it as well. Honestly, anyone who actually read the article, studied the article (i.e., didn't skim it while listening to music, TV, whatever) should have been able to answer all of these questions, none of which were esoteric.

Sorry for this long, and tardy, reply. I've been interviewed by Chronicle reporters in the past and I appreciate the good work you all are doing in keeping us informed of some incredibly interesting stories that in so many ways affect us all.

47. 22191530 - May 20, 2010 at 06:00 pm

Shiksha -

So coddled students should merely have to pay for their grades and not work for them?

48. jinxlou - May 20, 2010 at 06:24 pm

acobas - I hate to be the one to break it to you but multiple generations, including many thousands of people the age of these college students ARE out there defending your world right now. One of them happens to be a doctoral student whose studies were interrupted for three deployments. He has two young children. You would do well to pay respect to this generation. I am so tired of the fond hearkening back to the "olden times." Please, you all sound worse than your so-called "coddled" students. Grow up and recognize that you have a job to do. I've done analyses of these types of classes and, again, I hate to break it to you but there are typically no significant differences in student 'types' between sections of the same class. I am uncertain as to why there seems to be this overwhelming negative response to students as well as a completely blind faith in the teaching (or research) capabilities of faculty. Faculty often make poor, snap judgements based on little fact that are clouded by a few negative experiences with students. The lot of you sound exactly like uneducated nits. Go do your jobs.

49. 12111360 - May 20, 2010 at 08:21 pm

The issue is NOT whether this Professor does/does not have academic standards that are too high. Rather, the issue is that we are no longer at the top, but already at the bottom of the slippery slope of possibilities of administrative interference into the teaching/grading process if this outrageous decision gets to stand.

Arguing about Ms. Homberger's grade distribution merely distracts from the real problem. That is, if a professor can be removed from the classroom for being too "rigorous" in her expectations, what's next? What is the message to America's university faculty, let alone to the students? Most professors are aware that there exists an unofficial ranking system among students on every campus (Professor "X" is a tough grader; it's easy to get an 'A' from Professor "Y", etc.) The last thing we need is to see this unofficial system given the official stamp of approval by the university's administration. Not only would this heighten grade inflation further and thus devalue an already devalued American college education; it would, in the final analysis, make the students the determinators of what should be taught and what is or is not worthy of being learned. Please say it isn't so!

Removing a professor from the classroom for anything but blatant misconduct as outlined by a state's Education code or due to violations of American laws sets a dangerous precedent. Being a "tough grader" does not fall within these legal parameters, not by any stretch of the imagination.

50. csodell - May 21, 2010 at 03:49 am

Perhaps all faculty should copy the protocols of one of my colleagues:

1. grades are scaled in this manner

final grade = 10 times square root of actual average

example: student has 36% average but gets $10(6) = 60\%$

for a D

a 49% average becomes $10(7) = 70 = C$

This method, you see, improves the pass rate considerably while lowering the A grade only to an 81% and keeps the earned A's at A-level.

This, he claims, also improves his student evaluations so that the dean and dept chair will KNOW that he is a good teacher! In addition, his tests are simple computation exercises, void of critical thinking, analysis, or even the most simple "explain how you got your answer" demands. He says his students LOVE him and that his evaluations are great. Getting his students in a follow-up course is, however, quite the challenge. They know very little and expect the course requirements to be devoid of any real thinking.

2. Do everything you do with an eye toward those Student Evaluations of the Learning Environment -- cancel classes several times during the semester, let the students go early.

And finally, "visit" with the dean and dept chair regularly.

The real issue in Professor Homberger's case is the dictatorial manner in which the administration "solved the problem". It is also clear to me that having assigned Homberger to teach this class was, in itself, very clearly the grinding of some academic axe on the part of the person who did the scheduling. Clearly the administration in this case subscribes to the "keep the customer happy" version of higher education -- and I wonder who should carry the insurance to cover the lawsuits when the customer realizes that he/she has been sold defective merchandise. If we truly believe in the "keep the customer happy" model then students whose "education" fails them 5 years after graduation ought to be able to sue...right?

Administrative decisions like this one will, eventually, reduce the American higher education system to the level of the American middle school/high school system.

Finally, let me say that I do know that there are cases when tenured faculty must be removed. This does not appear to be one such case....and if it is, then the action taken fails to meet any of the safeguards we expect when we commit ourselves to university teaching.

51. mrmars - May 21, 2010 at 08:36 am

(with apologies for repeating this post from the "Try a Homberger Test " comments)

We are constantly admonished to try new and different teaching/testing/ assessment methods, more than a few of which - one suspects - are little more than excuses to dumb-down the assessment process ("portfolios" in non-art courses, etc.), but when someone comes up with one that is perceived as more rigorous, the situation (and the controversial response it elicits) becomes a national news item. Interesting, no?

Certainly the administration could and should have handled the situation more professionally, but unquestioned assumptions that student complaints are valid seem to be the norm these days (the customer IS always right!). Lord only knows how much havoc has and is being wreaked on faculty reputations and the effectiveness of the educational process by that mind-set. Hopefully the day will come when the "customer satisfaction" model is seen for the danger that it is, and hopefully this realization will come sometime before our American higher education system loses all credibility.

Dr. Homberger's testing methods are certainly different, and certainly require a more complete comprehension of the assigned articles than a standard four-or-five-choice multiple choice (MC) question. Interesting in itself given the criticisms that have been voiced about MC tests as being inferior to essay exams as tools for assessing student learning (the room for "BS-ing" that essay questions provide notwithstanding). So here we have a MC exam "on steroids," one which obviously requires attention to details and not just a vague understanding of the general "gist" of the material being taught. Maybe this is THEE answer to making MC exams more meaningful! I for one am going to push for a re-design of our fill-in-the-bubble op-scan sheets to include letters A through H, if not J. Let the content-first revolution begin!