

# Queen Bee or Responsible Academic?

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## ***The Chronicle for Higher Education***

***By Diane Auer Jones***

Yesterday's Chronicle reported on the action taken by Louisiana State University's dean of basic sciences, Kevin Carmen, to remove Dr. Dominique Homberger from the classroom at mid-semester when her mid-term grades showed that 60 percent of the students were failing and that no students had earned an A. Wow—this story raises all sorts of questions about the state of higher education in general, and in particular at LSU.

As a former biology professor, I am not at all surprised by low test scores or high drop rates among students who are enrolled in what might be the first rigorous, fact-based course they have ever taken. We know that our K-12 schools do not adequately prepare students for college-level work, and especially college-level work in math and science, which means that we should not be surprised when the majority of those students struggle in an introductory biology course. We can lament this reality, and work to improve K-12 education standards, but we should not solve this problem by lowering the academic standards to which college students are held. Instead, we need to be honest with students about the amount of work it will take on their part to develop the skills and attributes necessary for college success. We need to put the burden of learning back where it belongs—on the students.

Many students have spent their entire K-12 education - and a good part of their college experience - being told that there are no right or wrong answers, but instead that what matters most are their feelings and opinions, that they understand broad concepts (which has become a euphemism for not really knowing anything except the most obvious and basic ideas), or that they must "own" the learning that is taking place by "inventing" new methods for solving problems. Many would have us believe that memorization is an outdated learning modality in today's world where any "fact" can be found on Wikipedia. Of course, most who advance this notion are housed in academic education departments, where anecdotal support for feel-good theories dominates the field and where there is a dearth of substantiated facts or empirical evidence of anything. In the hard sciences, facts abound and those who want to be successful better learn a few of them.

We could argue forever about which facts are most important to know - an argument that we could never settle given that scientists tend to be niche specialists who want to emphasize the supreme importance of their niche over others, which confounds any genuine effort to focus on generalized scientific literacy. But regardless of which facts a student may or may not need to know, my sense from looking at Dr. Homberger's exam questions is that her focus is not on the specific facts themselves, such as whether or not domesticated animals are more or less likely to have an overbite than feral animals, but instead on helping her students develop the ability to read for content, and to apply the knowledge and concepts they have learned to understanding practical examples in the real world. While some professors might simply ask students to recite the basic principles of evolutionary and developmental biology or genetics, Dr. Homberger is asking students to apply those concepts to answer questions about how selective breeding may lead to morphological and behavioral traits among domesticated animals that differ from those derived in nature through the process of natural selection, genetic drift, or even genetic accident. If the students had read the articles, the answers to the test questions would be obvious. But I would also argue that those who had mastered the basic concepts of evolutionary biology and genetics (which are typical in an introductory biology course) could have deduced the correct answers regardless of whether or not they had memorized any specific facts from the assigned articles.

Of course, Dr. Homberger could have assigned the students to read Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* to see other practical examples of evolutionary biology, but I suspect students would have found that book to be far more challenging than the *American Scientist* or *Financial Times* articles she assigned. Those are perfectly appropriate publications from which to draw articles for an undergraduate audience. In fact, I commend Dr. Homberger for going the extra mile to find articles that enhance whatever basic information may have been presented in the textbook or in her lectures. I disagree with Dr. Cummins, a former graduate student and the wife of one of Dr. Homberger's colleagues, who declared that *Scientific American* articles are too challenging for undergraduate students. If LSU students can't read a *Scientific American* article, then perhaps they shouldn't be LSU students. Many high school teachers routinely assign readings from *Scientific American*, and well they should.

I would agree that the format of Dr. Homberger's exam questions is atypical in that there are more than five or six choices for some of her multiple-choice questions, but atypical format is not sufficient grounds for removal from the classroom. The real world is far more complex than multiple-choice questions with five possible answers, and perhaps our young people would be better served if we moved away from the multiple-choice format altogether. Of course, we all know that multiple-choice questions are not about pedagogical excellence, but are instead designed to make the job of grading quick and easy for professors. But regardless of how you might feel about multiple-choice questions, the content of Dr. Homberger's questions that were posted by *The Chronicle* did not seem unreasonable or inappropriate for an introductory biology class. Demanding? Yes. Unreasonable? No.

It is possible that *The Chronicle* elected to publish the more reasonable of Dr. Homberger's test questions or assignments, and that in fact reality is much worse than is reflected in this article. It is also possible that Dr. Homberger suffers from Queen Bee syndrome, and that she is impossible to mentor or work with. Or, she might be one of those aloof scientists who insists on speaking in tongues unknown to the general public and the

novice student. Or maybe she's just forgotten how little someone knows about science when they haven't spent the last 30 years of their life as a researcher and teacher. But if such is the case, it would appear that some other corrective course of action for either Dr. Homberger or her students should have preceded her removal from the classroom ... and that such action shouldn't have been delayed by 31 years. Perhaps Dean Carmen has tried everything possible to mentor Dr. Homberger and improve her performance, and the mid-term removal from the classroom was an act of exasperated desperation. Or, perhaps someone in the administration has decided that Dr. Homberger's retirement would be economically advantageous to the LSU budget, especially if she can be replaced by an underpaid adjunct professor. One would think that before removing a professor from the classroom, the dean should have made a classroom visit to evaluate the quality of instruction or even explore the relationship between the work assigned in the syllabus and the questions included on the exam.

Alternatively, perhaps the dean should have visited class one day to explain to students that in college, homework and assigned readings are not optional, that studying for the test involves more than night-before cramming, and that credit is awarded based on certain assumptions about the amount of time students spend in and out of class working to master the material of the class. Or he could have just bought some extra boxes of Kleenex for the "everyone gets a gold star" generation of students who have been told since birth that everyone's a winner ... that everyone is above average ... and that if they fail, it is definitely somebody else's fault.

What concerns me most about this story, however, is the obvious pressure that university administrators are placing on faculty to retain and graduate students, regardless of whether or not those students develop college-level knowledge and skills along the way. As I have stated many times before, the unreasonable focus that public-policy officials have placed on retention and graduation rates may have the very significant unintended consequence of diluting academic rigor to the point that an undergraduate credential will soon be about as meaningless as a high school diploma. As we have learned from history—and the simple economic principles of supply and demand—when everybody holds a particular credential, the relative value of that credential is significantly diminished. This is especially true if the way we achieve universal undergraduate education is by lowering academic standards rather than improving each student's academic preparation for college-level work ... and holding each student accountable for the effort they put forth to master higher level knowledge, skills, and abilities. Bravo to Dr. Homberger for holding firm in her belief that a college degree should mean something.

It is time for college and university administrators to ignore the demands of policy makers and philanthropists—people, who themselves have never taught a freshman course at a public institution—to graduate more students, just because. This focus on graduation rates is shortsighted and misplaced. Graduation rates might be the easiest indicator to measure, which is convenient for policy makers. Graduation rates, however, are not the most meaningful or reliable indicator of academic quality, especially since university officials can easily manipulate these data by doing things that are ultimately detrimental to students and our country.

Yes, institutions should understand what differentiates the successful and unsuccessful students on their campus, and what programs and activities could be developed to help more of the latter become the former. We should support, mentor, and cultivate excellence among our students, and work hard to help those who are falling behind. We should never return to the "look to your left, look to your right, one of you won't be here by the end of the semester" attitudes that once dominated academic departments, and in particular, academic science and math departments. And when instructors interfere with learning (as opposed to when they hold students to high but reasonable standards) we should take corrective action. But that doesn't mean that we should eviscerate rigorous college-level science instruction just so that everyone can get an A and put a diploma on their wall. What might make for good stump fodder for politicians, and what might help rich people feel better about the fortunes they have made at the expense of others, might not necessarily be what is best for students who seek a more meaningful existence and perhaps the chance for a better job.

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## Comments

### 1. ledzep - May 18, 2010 at 04:28 pm

What's really weird is that this is a response to mid-term grades. What are those for if not to send students a serious message about where their understanding is and where it needs to be?

### 2. rbannist - May 18, 2010 at 06:30 pm

Without concrete information about exactly what was going on at LSU far beyond what perhaps the school's spin on the situation or what an enterprising reporter might disclose (and education reporters are notorious for having exes to grind), it's hard to judge what really happened there other than LSU as an institution failed its students miserably. It does raise questions, and Diane Auer-Jones captures many of them in her column.

Biology 101, along with Freshman Comp, is one of the few courses almost every single college student cannot avoid. It can be an amazingly useful and stimulating course or worse than death warmed over. Examining the state of this particular class provides a good microcosm of higher education at large. Biology requires a tremendous knowledge base -- the essential vocabulary, key concepts, and principles. It requires a lot of applied learning and conjecture. A class in biology is not complete without raising some key ethical, moral, environmental and legal issues as well.

As such all that goes into defining excellent teaching and solid student evaluation mechanisms can be well examined in such a class.

This writer believes the core content in undergrad requirements is not rigorous enough and that students are not held accountable for mastering the essentials. What are the ten or twelve key principles a student should retain from a general biology class? What written tasks should a student be able to execute skillfully from freshman composition? What key aspects of the structure of the United States government, federal/state/local, the legislative process, and the constitution be part of an intro civics/political science class. Surely students should be able to identify key historical events and explain the core conflicts from the rise of civilization through the 20th century in World History and there are certain essentials for US History all should learn. Students require a certain proficiency in math and ability function successfully in numerous tasks using computers and other technology gizmos.

Sadly, this core is not well-defined nor are clear expectations being illuminated. An undergraduate student from LSU will be able to..... Clear

explicit outcomes and abilities should have been met at a demanding level of competence.

The grade or A or that students will receive A's in any college class should never be a given. Only those who have mastered the requirements of the course at a high level clearly exceeding expectations should be awarded A grades. All students should have B's with in their grasp meaning they have done a better than average job mastering the course's content. If a student shows up and does his or her job, the grade is a C. In the era of grade inflation that has been the norm for the last few decades, many students who satisfactorily complete their course work are given more honorific grades, A's and B's. Students who've mastered some of the content but have done so in a mediocre fashion are D students. Yes, there are failures and they can be students who actually do show up for class. If a student doesn't master the content, the student fails. It certainly should be possible for teachers to teach classes where most students get B's or better or that aside from a notorious slacker or two, not have any students earn below a C. It is also possible and should be acceptable that no students get A's.

When I taught, once a student proved capable of doing A work, I had a nasty habit of raising the bar higher and higher. Some students might have a good enough background and be skillful enough that the normal A requirements could easily be met and could glide to an A even if it were a challenging class for the vast majority of students. Those students would get some special attention and be graded more against their capability not the established norm. How I'd laugh when they'd complain I was not being fair but once they endured the torture they could feel the love later.

How on earth can there be a survey class where 60% of the students are failing? Hopefully, this was not the case of an instructor being sacrificed as the easy out for a system failing miserably. Still, Ms. Jones did a great job identifying a myriad of things that could cause problems. There's no getting around the horrible job public education is doing preparing students for college work or any facet of the real world where standardized testing and zero tolerance discipline have replaced any hope for real learning. The almighty NCLB scores have schools operating in a paranoid tizzy doing everything possible to gin up the math and reading scores while everything that is not part of NCLB testing goes to hell. While states point the finger at the Feds, the dirty little secret is that the exams are ones that states create for their own schools. Entering into the NCLB zone, school systems hate NCLB, do not want it to succeed, thus they use their mediocre tests more to explain why things can't get better. Music, art, and phys ed programs get reduced or eliminated for the all important math and reading scores. A former Chapter One teacher from a city in southwest Virginia related to me that they even cut ten minutes off of lunch down to 20 minutes in a chapter one school, after eliminating "special" classes and recess for pumping up the scores. Dear school bureaucrat, what makes you think allocating more time to a program that doesn't work in the first place is going to produce results?

There is no question that the secular humanist creed of making sure all course content is non-offensive, absolutely politically correct and communicated in language and form so no one feels excluded stands in total opposition to challenging. How much content is watered down so as not to do harm to hyphenated-challenged or offended persons? How much traditional biology instruction in secondary school gets co-opted to teach nutrition and to preach the anti-obesity propaganda. Well, where do schools conveniently stick in a state or county mandate to teach about sexually transmitted diseases. Oh, let biology do it.

What kind of preparation for good old challenging, academically demanding college work is little Johnny getting when schooling first makes little Johnny a mindless zombie, teaches reading so Johnny can't read in any kind of critical or analytic perspective, but while Johnny is achieving virtually nothing, he'll get his little achievement plaques, gold stars, and happy face doodles. Does Johnny feel good about himself? Does he look in the mirror and say "I am special!" WOO-HOO! No child should feel excluded, isolated or labelled. No child is left behind from the required BS, but when it comes to becoming a well-rounded, well-educated graduate little Johnny is still a blank slate.

Look at the text book wars in Texas and see how revealing that is why public schools are doomed. Does any one see evidence of true academic excellence or true scholarship being of primary importance in building curriculum? Hardly, the left will swear that the right is deadset about eliminating any pretense of scientific method for the sake of literal creationism. The right has numerous grievances about providing a socialist spin on all aspects political and economic warping the roll of the founders, the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. The result are who wins the political arguments wins what is included in the curriculum and where does scholastic excellence or accuracy come it to play?

That the nation's 2nd largest state has a process where statewide instruction is guided by the decision of partisan bureaucrats whose guiding ideology and no real consideration for scholarship yields meaningless instruction. If the mob ruled, how many school systems today would not teach evolution?

Additionally, to what extent do kids enter college having ever had the requirement to engage in real research when an embellished cut and paste from Wikipedia gets a pat on the noggin and a gold star in public schools?

Education on all levels requires pragmatic, realistic, and forceful critics and reformers who share much of Diane Auer Jones' wisdom.

Ms. Jones identifies that outside largely political forces are undermining schools ability to lock in on and focus on quality instruction, student development, and appraisal. Every action the Feds take where government funny money lands on campus for any purpose, the strings attached, the requirements, the compliance documentations, and the unfunded mandates accumulate. Administration and management are increasingly doing the political two-step and not focusing in on the priority one -- student learning and along with it quality research and helping professors and instructors be the outstanding teachers and researchers we demand them to be.

As such, students hear, they don't listen; they chat, but they don't communicate; they receive instruction but they don't learn.

Schools need to be driven by better metrics than poorly defined graduation rates.

We are watching before our eyes the values of a challenging top flight liberal arts core vanish. That DeVry, University of Phoenix, and Walden can deliver content and grant degrees on line makes the challenge all the more obvious, why tie up the time, money, and resources attending live classes when the goods needed by job hunters can be purchased on line? That aside from the purely cut and dry factual oriented courses this question can even be realistically asked today shows the many fatal blows higher education has taken as they have been radically transformed from an academic mission to a political mission.

Does anyone think this LSU story is an isolated exception? Surely this is the tip of an iceberg we're still seeking data to accurately define. This writer feels confident quite a few people reading this latest Brainstorm installment will be able to report cases from their schools and universities that reveal equally unfortunate outrages.

It might be helpful in future postings if Ms. Auer-Jones would identify examples of good instruction, be it good programs she's observed or the qualities of some of the better educators she has encountered and use her vast knowledge of policy and bureaucracy to show how much of the best of which education has to offer is threatened from being delivered.

**3. strider - May 18, 2010 at 06:33 pm**

Hard not to agree. A professor should have some discretion in his or her class.

**4. ginnis - May 19, 2010 at 07:17 am**

I do hope this is an isolated occurrence, but I fear that more instances like this will be reported. Yes - the point of midterm grades is to let students know they are at risk. Yes - at least in recent decades, the transition to the standards at most 4 year institutions is difficult for a lot of traditional students, but many students rise to the occasion. And, wouldn't this be a contractual issue - the rules and processes associated with dismissal?

**5. ksledge - May 19, 2010 at 07:36 am**

I agree with the content of this article, but I'm not a fan of Dr. Homberger's test examples. As a commenter said on that post, each question is like several T/F questions. So a student who knows a LOT but not quite enough to get the problem correct will get the same amount of credit as someone who knows nothing. I just bet that the test might not do much to differentiate people that well.

Then again, it's hard to know without seeing all examples. But typically the way to test people is to have a range of questions so that you can differentiate the As from the Bs, but also the Ds from the Fs.

As I'm not a biologist, I'll trust the author of this article that Dr. Homberger had questions that required applying knowledge of the facts rather than just memorization. That's something I very much respect.

**6. rchill - May 19, 2010 at 08:09 am**

I actually use multiple-multiple choice. There are five possible answers; from one to five could be right. Every correctly chosen response = 1pt. Every incorrect choice NOT chosen = 1pt. I am a biologist, and I find this allows me to cover both basic "kick it back to me" facts as well as some integration and synthesis.

College, any major, should be difficult and challenging. Learning is a two-sided endeavor. The professor must be challenging, available and fair; students must engage the material and put in the time needed to succeed. I cannot tell you how many students tell me of their other commitments; sometimes sports and college activities, other times work and family. I do understand the work and family, but I cannot lower my standards. I must prepare them for the challenge of the real world, for the next step so many of them tell me they want (medical/vet/dental/pharmacy/physical therapy or graduate school). NCLB is not a failure - it alerted us to the fact that many students were receiving miserable educations. The response is what has failed; you can both teach so students learn AND succeed in the standardized tests. But it takes effort, creativity, money and time. Like many of our undergraduate students, many educators want a quick fix solution as well. Doesn't exist, doesn't happen.

**7. bpilgrim - May 19, 2010 at 08:36 am**

Whenever abysmal graduation rates are reported, it is always with the finger of blame pointed squarely at the school. What about the students? Do they have any responsibility for their own academic progress, or is it solely the school's job to ensure students' graduation? I wholeheartedly agree with Jones. By pushing the "college for everybody" agenda, we've lowered rigor. Feelings and opinions don't require study or research, and many students today (especially freshmen) honestly believe that their mental interaction with an idea presented in class should be all that is required of them - no study, no research, no memorization - try learning a language or hard science with that attitude.

**8. eacowan - May 19, 2010 at 09:37 am**

Prof. Auer Jones, and also no.2 rbannist, rightly point to bureaucratic fixation on retention and graduation rates as the source of diluted course content and inflated grades. The bureaucrats with this fixation will likely not read Prof. Auer Jones' article at all; or if they do, they will not recognize their folly for what it is. The fixation is part and parcel of the trend toward corporate governance in academe over the last few decades. The industrial model of widgets-per-hour is not the way to go in academe, nor will it work to the benefit of academe. A paradigm of modern academe may be found in Evelyn Waugh's satirical story "The Loved One," set in a mortuary for pets where the operative motto is "move the meat." Do universities really want their operative motto to be "CARNEM MOVEMVS"? --E.A.C.

**9. sahara - May 19, 2010 at 10:10 am**

But don't you see? The "bureaucratic fixation on retention and graduation rates" has further important implications for society. Improved retention rates lead to higher graduation rates, which improve individuals' opportunities in the job market, attract employers to a region, and eventually strengthen the economic fabric of a community, which in turn strengthens schools because parents are employed and educated parents care about their kids' schools. "A rising tide lifts all boats." It's a good thing to care about retention and graduation rates. The challenge here is getting college students to engage in some dedicated serious learning so that their degrees mean something when they finish.

**10. goxewu - May 19, 2010 at 11:11 am**

When I still went to faculty parties and someone would stand there yammering on and on about something academic while you desperately needed a white wine refill, a common squelch was to smile faintly at the person and say simply, "Publish that."

Blog comments don't count as real publishing, and rbannist does go on and on (actually, I agree with him and Ms Auer Jones about the grades deal: the LSU administration should butt out). I mean, 1700 words for a single comment?

Prolixity carries, however, its own punishments, and one of them is that sooner or later the droner says something ludicrous. Here's rbannist's example:

"There is no question that the secular humanist creed of making sure all course content is non-offensive, absolutely politically correct and communicated in language and form so no one feels excluded stands in total opposition to challenging."

Uh, it's sure not the secular humanists who are trying to muck up biology by inserting "intelligent design" into it and howling when the biology professor won't teach creationism as science. Those who take offense at the content of Biology 101 are not usually secular humanists, but religious types (not all religious types, of course) who object to natural selection, an Earth more than 6000 years old, the idea of evolution as still ongoing, a whole lot of unflattering ancestry that DNA points to. And as for rbannist's follow-on complaint--coming when he cranks up a general harrangue about liberals' deleterious effect in general on public education--"Well, where do schools conveniently stick in a state or county mandate to teach about sexually transmitted diseases. Oh, let biology do it":

Where educational conservatives usually want sex education stuck is outside the classroom entirely. They don't say, "Oh, let biology do it"; they say, "Oh, let the parents do it at home, which is the only place sex education should occur."

Two lessons: 1) brevity, 2) stay on point.

#### **11. chronictl - May 19, 2010 at 11:45 am**

What would eacowan suggest as appropriate indicators for bureaucrats, faculty, and society at large to focus on in lieu of retention and graduation rates? What evidence of our contributions and impact do we as educators want to present?

#### **12. mvclibrary - May 19, 2010 at 12:05 pm**

Faculty fired for not moving the meat is nothing new - it happens at my school (Missouri Valley College) all the time.

#### **13. mmccllln - May 19, 2010 at 12:47 pm**

My son and stepson were both fortunate to have attended a rigorous public high school. One will be a senior in college this year, the other a junior. Only one time have either one of them said - about one of their college classes - 'this is harder than high school.' Five years of college between them and they have felt challenged once. As mvclibrary said, "move the meat." The quality of the education - and they both attend the same large, public university and are majoring in two different subjects (Journalism and Biology)- is getting poorer and poorer.

#### **14. 42zing - May 19, 2010 at 01:28 pm**

Is there no faculty union at LSU? This is a good article except for the gratuitous shot at yesteryear's darwinian education: "We should never return to the "look to your left, look to your right, one of you won't be here by the end of the semester" attitudes that once dominated academic departments,..." Never underestimate the motivational value of fear.

#### **15. div411 - May 19, 2010 at 03:24 pm**

I once taught at LSU--history, not biology. It has some of the dumbest students on the planet. I remember students who could not write or, for that matter, speak in sentences. But the school was also corrupt. STUDENT ATHLETES, as they are so fondly named, were coddled in every possible way. They were put into the easiest courses, assigned personal tutors, given help of all kinds with their work, housed in luxury, and celebrated as the real stars of the campus. Faculty seen as sympathetic to athletes got free tickets to events. Worst, coaches--not all but some--would call up faculty and especially teaching assistants and "urge" them to reconsider the grades of athletes whose low grades threatened their eligibility. There is no faculty union. This is the South.

I don't know the particulars of the case at hand. But the decision to remove the teacher simply because she is a hard grader is disgraceful.

DR

#### **16. optimysticynic - May 19, 2010 at 06:18 pm**

LSU and most of the other big athletic schools in the South. I work at one in KY, where the athletic department just sent a bunch of their staff to visit the academic major most taken by the dumbest athletes (football and basketball players). They, um, "discussed" with faculty the athletes' progress and happened to bring along some tshirts and tickets. The discussion focused on how the athletes could, um, improve their performance in the classes. This conversation included the discussion of grade minimums necessary for the athletes. This isn't even a secret.

On the student services side (the folks who determine whether or not a given student has met requirements for graduation), we are being not-so-subtly told that our jobs might be in danger if we don't meet the legislature's demand for degree-doubling by 2020. In other words (and we all know it, talk about it openly): let more students get through or be fired.

So guess what's happening when a student is short a few hours here or there?

#### **17. rbannist - May 19, 2010 at 07:11 pm**

A couple notes for goxewu. Polysyllabic profundity is one of my vices. I plead guilty. While I surely would be considered conservative by most measures, there are some tenants of modern conservatism, particularly in education that drives me nuts -- as if the notion of, "If it worked for grand dad, why can't it work now" isn't bad enough.

I hope education serves to provide instruction that reflects the best, most thorough scholarship, and that conflicting points of view and vigorous debates are part of it. Consider teaching environmental science as one for instance.

Oooh, sex education, clearly the behavior of adolescents for the last forty years screams for its inclusion in education, but how much of it turns out to be education and not moral indoctrination? I'd love to hear some thoughts when, where, and how it should be taught. Why not make it a part of English curriculum. when this writer taught English, we had a unit that innvolved drug abuse for the DARE program. The kids had a great time when real police and "narcs" did their presentations.

Worthy of a quality blog is how today's public education evolved out of the industrial revolution preparing good widget whammers for the assembly line. As such, good compliant students who can master repetative functions and not examine the big picture were the desired outcome, and the teaching function itself took on characteristics of assembly line production where certain concepts and skills are "installed" on the linear progression from K-12. Consistency and uniformity of results would be far more important than anything else.

While Ms. Auer-Jones can take some rather interesting positions tat one of her main themes is liberating education from the widget-whammer mentality is a good thing for which I salute her.

#### **18. goxewu - May 19, 2010 at 08:35 pm**

It ain't syllables that are rbannist's problem.

"I hope education serves to provide instruction that reflects the best, most thorough scholarship, and that conflicting points of view and vigorous debates are part of it." This smells like that "teach the controversy" argument in favor of letting religion--in the form of "intelligent design" and "creationism" into the science classroom. Is it?

What does rbannist's paragraph about sex education, in #17, have to do with his previous contention (now abandoned?) that PCers want to leave it to biology classes?

I thought it's those spongy, relativist, liberal-artsy, "enrichment"-for-its-own-sake, vocationally deaf liberals who are trying to "liberate education from the widget-hammer mentality," while it's vocationally realist, education-is-a-marketplace, cut-the-useless-liberal-arts-crap conservatives who're trying to keep education locked in a widget-hammer (well, computer-chip) mentality. Have I got it backwards?

#### **19. generally\_academic - May 19, 2010 at 09:46 pm**

What disturbs me most about this issue are the passive-aggressive methods the admin uses to enforce its demand that we pass sub-standard students, in our case because we need the money that they pay, to "support our institution."

1. Ignoring complaints about racist and right-wing extremist students who act on their ugly beliefs by confronting professors and threatening them. We just had cases of racist students actually getting up in classes and challenging a "retarded" (minority) professor or writing racist threats against another (minority) professor. And there were (self-identified) "white power," Ayrian Nation students who harassed another professor. It took a semester and a half to get the admin to act on all these (several) incidents. Through it all, the university police refused to act--in fact, they even sent emails out saying they would not enforce the laws that the "skinheads" were breaking. It took a widely-circulated email that included several legal phrases that made the admin liable for action if they did nothing, to get any action. In the latter case, they only went after one student who was caught on camera, and to this day they have not made any known attempt to identify the many other students involved.

2. Rigging teaching evaluations and awards to put pressure on recalcitrant professors. By letting students have secret votes to choose who will be the "best" professors of the year, the admin sees that the easy profs and the panderers get public praise, while the serious profs (who are not terribly tough graders) never receive any public (or private) acknowledgment of their good work. Those awards come with cash, so being a good but somewhat tough teacher hurts your bank balance.

These are the kind of things that are really going on out there, to keep the meat moving down the conveyor belt. Welcome to the public university in 2010!

#### **20. luther\_blissett - May 19, 2010 at 11:19 pm**

Can we just talk about the grading issue here?

(a) If no one in your class is getting an A, and if that many students are failing, you had better decide (1) how effective is your teaching? (2) are your goals reasonable goals for that group of students?

(b) Is a test failed by so many and mastered by none an accurate or precise measuring tool for student achievement?

(c) Has anyone bothered giving this test to, say, the equivalent course at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton? Or to students in a similar course at a similarly-ranked school?

(d) Has anyone any record of how this teacher taught her lessons? What did she do to ensure mastery? What did she do, on a daily basis, to see what her students were learning or failing to learn? What did she do to analyze her assignments and quizzes and tests to determine what concepts or information sets the students were having trouble with? What did she do to assist those students who struggled?

It seems to me that there's not enough information in the public sphere about this case to have any educated opinion one way or another about what happened to this teacher.

**21. rbannist - May 20, 2010 at 12:11 am**

Responding again to goxewu:

Creationism and ID are not science. They do not belong in science curriculum except perhaps as a means to establish -- "Here's how this issue is handled outside of science." While some very intelligent, respectable people believe in such notions, this is 2010, our knowledge of the building blocks of life, chemistry, physics, and broiling a good steak have changed so much. Facts are facts. Theories are theory. Scientists support theory with fact but also can be guilty of infusing ideology and in so doing about the validity of their investigation. Science can't explain everything. Come on, how silly does the often asked question of creationists, "Well how can you know that because ou weren't around to see it? God would never lie to me so I'll stick with what the good book says." Trying to reason with the unreasonable is futile. However, a well-balanced curriculum that teaches history, brings to life what people were like 2010 years ago in Nazareth. What they understood and what concepts were beyond their grasp provides one building block toward greater understanding. Studying the history of ideas, the grown of understanding of the building blocks of life and matter and those "little beasties" under the microscope is another building block. Philosophy classes that teach logic, theological versus scientific thinking, the assumptions on what each rests is another building block. It's not easy, it's all part of the total program which today is becoming more and more hostage to intrusive extremists both left and right who lobby and fight for majorities to get their view regardless of its academic value cemented in their schools' program.

Science is a great place for serious debate. Issues some scientists would have us take as matters of scientific fact which seem to still be open for discussion such as the climate change controversy, how much of it is the result of human behavior, how much of climate is cyclical, what roll solar flares and solar cycles could play. Here's an area were shelving the political and ideological and getting into hard science and discussion should be welcome.

Sex education...I didn't answer but indicated is one of the ultimate educational hot potatoes. The decision when, where, and how it is taught has everything to do with politics -- what pressure grievance groups in the community can stir up, how fearful school systems hide behind political correctness, and ultimately where in academia should such instruction be provided. Inattention means, "Don't worry the kids will figute it out sooner or later on their own."

Obviously schools don't know how to handle it simply by looking at the prevalence of STD's, teen pregnancy, and other issues on a huge raft of misconceptions. If it's something that's supposed to be taught at home, society cannot hold parents legally responsible for not providing competent instruction. Back in the 1960's, in 6th grade all the boys were separated from the girls while the girls were supposed to never tell the boys about "the film." Meanwhile, the guys played Greek Dodge, got a visit from a local sports figure who gave a pep talk about good sportsmanship, and maybe they learned how to win one for the gipper. To this day, the boys now in their 50's don't know what was in "the film" but we suspect it was more than how to make cookies and brownies from scratch. Back when many of our ancestors lived and worked on farms, nobody needed sex education.

My sarcastic suggestion it could be included in English class might not be as silly as it seems. The bottom line is conflicting social and moral values will always come into play so it will never be easy. It doesn't require any deep thinking to see why biology might seem the safe place -- yes Virginia, humans do procreate much like fury rabbits.

Final paragraph in goxewu #18

It appears goxewu is obsessed with trying to get all issues regarding education somehow placed somewhere on the left/right continuum. There are conservative and liberal factions who would for numerous reasons insist that the traditional liberal arts approach is obsolete. Others see the liberal arts experience, the development of a rich background in many disciplines, the emphasis on learning critical thinking, logic, rhetoric, oratorical, and abstract reasoning being vital to develop highly capable graduates who have the tools to think out of the box and express themselves convincingly. Who will be able to create the design for the most cost-effective, best performing widget for the 21st century with new techniques to whom the old widget where it needs to go? Can we afford to keep resorting to the same old same band-aid solutions? Are we so focused on this quarter's report that we miss the need for serious reengineering? Hey, who's going show us widgets are an obsolete 19th century technology and the industry would be best converting to cyber-whoba-jubbas instead? That any of us should have to defend the value of a good liberal arts program should be considered absolutely insane.

Hey does anybody remember why Diane Auer Jones left her assistant cabinet post? There's one person among many who can defend the liberal arts tradition far better than this former educator.

We should all be looking at what's happening in Texas and how much the left and right have taken education hostage and reduced it to who wins and who loses for the right of publishing the next generation of Texas textbooks that then will become staples on the shelves of many schools nationwide. This humble blogger thinks the battle is already lost in Texas fully aware that regardless of which side wins, the real loser is the truth.

**22. generally\_academic - May 20, 2010 at 12:23 am**

rbannist: nothing personal, but do you really expect us to read comments that run in length over two screens? Conciseness. A virtue in communication.

**23. eacowan - May 20, 2010 at 07:55 am**

Re no.11: "What would eacowan suggest as appropriate indicators for bureaucrats, faculty, and society at large to focus on in lieu of retention and graduation rates? What evidence of our contributions and impact do we as educators want to present?"

The focus should be upon students' actually learning the material. The students should know that learning the material is their responsibility, just as presenting the material to be learned is the professor's responsibility. Professors profess, teachers teach, and students study to learn. This matter seems to have been lost amidst administrators' concern over lifeless statistics. Perhaps more scholars and general academics should spend some

time as administrators or as regents. Then again, perhaps not.

NOTE: I have a Ph.D. in German from the Univ. of Pennsylvania. I spent three years on that campus happily unaware that my second alma mater had a football team. Now I'm a retired professor in Arlington TX, where one of the largest (and awfulest!) football stadiums in the world has been perpetrated upon the landscape. Juvenal fumed in his time over the Romans' preoccupation with "panem et circenses". Today it's "fast food and spectator sports". Nothing seems to have changed at all ...) --E.A.C.

**24. mrmentor - May 20, 2010 at 12:48 pm**

Some campuses are more tolerant of corruption than others, as a former member of that campus's faculty mentioned in his/her posting above. Dr. Homberger was not playing by the corrupt administrative rules on her campus. She was not a good 'ole girl. But then: collegiality is more important for some "colleagues" and/or "administrators" than "college," i.e., education, i.e., challenging students to learn.

**25. marka - May 20, 2010 at 02:59 pm**

This article is right on! And generally good comments -- altho' I do get tired of multiple back & forth between/among a handful of anonymous bloggers: 1 comment is generally more than enuf, 2 suspect, 3 suggests blogger has nothing better to do than clog up blog -- please get other lives.

As for retention/graduation: altho' these are loose proxies for progress, they are too loose to have much weight in accurately determining learning, and earning a degree. Unfortunately, the trend has been to social promotion - a degree doesn't mean as much as it used to, other than having the perseverance to stick with a particular program for a number of years. Just a few decades ago, a 'gentleman's C' was more than good enuf - Kerry & G.W. Bush got thru Yale that way. And there wasn't the same kind of social stigma for not having a degree: Bill Gates, Paul Allen, and others 'dropped' out to do something better, and aren't the poorer for it. As with other kinds of inflation, grade-flation ultimately debases the grade. And the more one debases the grade/degree, the higher a grade/degree is then expected. Which then leads to further inflation ... a vicious cycle.

So ... a 'passing' grade, and a degree, ought to mean the attainment of a certain level of knowledge & skill, such that one can progress to the next step in attaining knowledge & skill, that step having some real connection to success in the world beyond schooling. In the sciences, there are some relatively objective criteria for that, and if most of the class can't pass, then they shouldn't be moving on to the next level. A harsh lesson to learn at the college level -- a lesson many could have, but didn't, learn in our public school system, because we are more interested in passing problems on ('passing the trash' as some have named it) than straightforwardly and honestly confronting these issues -- there is no current reward for this in the public arena, and plenty of risks for doing so. And the initiative to give everyone a college education is misguided, precisely because not every is ready for, interested in, or willing to do some of the hard work necessary to actually earn a real degree. Not everyone is 'college material' -- our problem is that we continue to allow wealthier white kids to get 'degree' whether they've earned them or not, and think the solution is to let poorer kids of color get a degree without earning them either. The solution should be to let more poorer kids of every stripe in, and weed out rich & poor, 'white' & 'colored' on the merits. I'm not holding my breath ...

My spouse used to teach an anatomy class, a prerequisite for a number of professional tracks, and most students couldn't pass. She didn't create some abnormal individual curriculum -- she taught from a standard text with standard objectives, using standard instructional tools. And her experience wasn't unusual. Our daughter, then in high school, could comprehend the materials, and helped my spouse with grading. Some students had no problem with the material -- it wasn't rocket science, or even introductory biology -- it is basically remembering relationships of various systems to one another, with standard works to guide one. A decent biology background, a decent memory & some hard work was almost all that was required. It was clear that many of these 'college' students couldn't pass our daughter's high school biology classes, much less absorb the anatomy material, and were more interested in the grade than in learning the material. 'Dumbing down' the material wasn't a practical option -- for those aspiring to health care careers, this material was foundational, and achieving a certain level of knowledge was critical for progressing to other material. At least in the sciences, there is no point in 'passing the trash' on to the next course -- if you can't master the material, you should consider another major, and move on. And there shouldn't be any shame in that -- not all of us are cut out to be doctors or nurses, no matter how much we would like there to be more of them. And simply passing them on so our numbers look good is a recipe for failure at the treatment end.

A symptom of our postmodern deconstructionist relativist times ...

**26. 70119 - May 21, 2010 at 01:37 am**

Good article and I'd like to confirm some comments, especially numbers 15, 16, 19 and 24. I don't actually know Homberger and I've never taken biology, but I am from the area and I have seen some of her tests. They're not really all that hard, you just have to have done the reading. Mine require the same, but students produced by NCLB often do not see that connection. I've been told explicitly by students that test taking is not connected to learning material, and test taking is what they want to learn how to do.

#25: The man down the hall from me, a good teacher and popular, says: "Some of these students are really incompetent, and someone has to tell them so -- before they s\*\*\*\* up NASA!" He has a point. Evaluation is part of teaching, too.

Also, a friend of mine who is in business says there is a division of HR in his company whose job it is to teach people how to work with college graduates who do not actually know their subjects.

The sports/corruption problem isn't just in the South, though. I was in graduate school at one of those public Ivies elsewhere, and TA'd a very large lecture class. Whole frat houses took it together, and a lot of people failed. The football coach came to see me on it and seemed surprised I did not negotiate.

Athletes who failed were going to have to go to summer school and miss athlete summer camp. The coach said it was my fault that "a lot of people won't be flying to Hawaii tonight."

**27. batemat - May 21, 2010 at 04:24 pm**



I am a first-year TT chemistry prof. One of the biggest surprises in my first year teaching introductory and university chemistry courses to freshmen is the complete lack of critical thinking skills these students have. While I have not had quite the extreme grade depression exhibited in the above example, I am certainly not surprised by it. I cannot believe the university has scapegoated the professor for the students lack of performance. I wonder which big donor's kid was in the class.

**28. generally\_academic - May 22, 2010 at 03:05 am**

Of course, here in Texas, the dumbing down of the curriculum is quite deliberate, as the recent kerfuffle over the history curriculum should show. If students develop creative and critical thinking skills, they would see the manipulative, propagandistic nature of their education, and extrapolate to the general political manipulation of the population that keeps The Bubbas in power. Bubba only wants to turn over power to Bubba Jr., so the system perpetuates itself. Keep 'em ignorant, pregnant\*, and working': that's the way to keep 'em in line.

\*Note the most recent survey that again confirms that Red States have the highest teen pregnancy and (at the time of insemination) highest out-of-wedlock pregnancy rates. Only a few places are redder than Texas (or, judging by my open-admissions first-years, dumber).

**29. 70119 - May 22, 2010 at 01:29 pm**

Public high schools teach memorization only, it seems, and resemble prisons; private high schools tell students they have eccentric "learning styles" which require spoon feeding. There are a few high schools in my area that don't do those things and their students do have critical thinking skills.

My university doesn't require much math for college entrance. Most students take algebra in college and fail a few times before they pass it. Math really does develop the mind and I believe that is why more of it used to be required earlier. So I guess yes, the problem is high school. Maybe everyone needs Upward Bound now.

This makes me wonder whether the whole freshman year needs a redesign. It used to be that the big science courses, even those for nonmajors, were weed-out courses, but now the need seems to be for developmental work. It seems to me Homerger is trying to develop something that actually would respond to that situation: a gen ed course that works on development of critical thinking, is interesting (has you reading and discussing Scientific American) but not a gut course.

**30. kymac - May 22, 2010 at 01:34 pm**

Someone said Scientific American articles were too hard to read!?! Good god! Scientific American articles are only a step up from those science blurbs you get in newspapers! As a scientist I can't stand SA!

**31. kymac - May 22, 2010 at 02:04 pm**

To the above posters who say that a 60% failing rate means the teacher's doing something wrong....did you ever think the students are doing something wrong?

I had something similar, also Biology. Less than half the class got above a C. I didn't understand - I was teaching the same way I'd been taught, and I'd learned it well enough to get an A. Additionally there were several students who HAD gotten A's - incidentally the ones who'd expressed concerns at the beginning of the semester because they hadn't taken a science course in a while.

So I talked to these students to find out what was wrong. They said they didn't like it being taught like a "graduate class." I asked how many had taken a graduate class to make that comparison. None raised their hand. One said, "your class is the only class I'm taking this semester that is harder than high school." ...so since it's harder than high school, it's graduate level? What, pray tell, is the undergraduate level supposed to be?

I asked them about studying outside of class. None of the students who earned below a C studied outside of class. "We don't study outside of class for our other classes and we get A's. You shouldn't expect us to study for yours outside of class."

That is the reason why 60% of students can fail an exam - as mentioned in the article many of them don't both studying - they never had to in high school and with many other classes you can BS your way through it. You can't BS your way through science.

And contrary to what one poster wrote, all freshman do not have to take Biology at most schools. Most schools require you to take one SCIENCE. You could take chemistry instead. However Biology has the reputation for being the "easy" science, which is not true. I know some chemists and physicists who hated Biology for its difficulty. Don't whine to me about having to take a single science, though. I was a science major and had to take countless humanities. I aced every single one of them with barely a thought.

But back to teaching! At this college that I was teaching like a "graduate" class, students dropped because it was hard. The Vice President told me I needed to water down the content. I replied I had watered it down greatly from what I had learned in the same course already - if I watered it down any more I could not honestly say it would be equivalent to other colleges' biology classes for transfer. He said he would handle the transfer committees and that I should water it down.

I left the college. (Incidentally at that college I had just replaced someone who did teach about how God created all cells and life....she wasn't actually fired! She just had left for family reasons.)

During interviews for my next college I made it clear I maintained high standards. One college seemed very receptive to this. I took a position there. The students I was teaching would next move on to apply for a competitive program (for which a 3.75 GPA was needed). I thought this showed how seriously the school took education!

My first semester there many of my students came up the first day and said, "I am applying for program X so I need an A." The very first day! I told them they would get the grade they earned and instructed them on ways they could earn an A. Some students who earned an 85 or so on the first

exam, out of five, dropped the class because they were not getting their As. Others hounded me for extra credit. The drop rate was high in my class, but it was the same in another person's class teaching the same subject. Students earned A's in my class and actually thanked me for making them work hard and making them learn the material. Several have thanked me in later semesters as well - the foundation I gave them in study habits helped them in other classes.

The administration just sees my high drop rate (about 30%) and low A rate (only 15%...which is still above the standard curves 10%). They say I need to make students happier. I tell them students will be happier if I make it easier to get an A. Are they asking me to lower standards?

The answer is no - giving out more A's would increase the acceptance GPA from 3.75 to 3.85 or so, so giving out more A's would be bad!

But...my B+ students drop because they aren't getting an A. The only way to keep them in my class is to give them an A they haven't earned.

"Don't give them the A! Give them the B+! But make sure they stay in your class!"

It is utterly ridiculous.

### **32. prof313 - May 22, 2010 at 09:07 pm**

The dumbing down process other posters have pointed to is further exacerbated by our reliance on adjuncts. Too many departments hold student evaluations as the primary standard for adjunct hiring decisions; a fact too many adjuncts understand. Unless we can provide our adjuncts the type of security that will allow them to subject students to the necessary rigor undergraduate education requires, we will see adjuncts lowering standards, passing failing students and watering down content in order to keep their meager incomes intact.

### **33. manhire - May 24, 2010 at 12:01 pm**

Thanks for writing "Queen Bee or Responsible Academic?" Ms. Jones. Please also write about the following matter:

Ohio University Plagiarism  
<http://ohiouniversityplagiarism.blogspot.com/>

Brian Manhire  
Professor Emeritus  
Ohio University