

Student Evaluations, Grades, and the Internet

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Over the last thirty years, the system of student evaluation of teachers in colleges evolved - step by step - as a result of an implicit plot by academic administrators [who are unable to fill classes by students properly prepared to attend these classes] and by unqualified students [who want to be awarded high grades without either having or getting skills and knowledge]. For great educational experience - nobody talks about great education - teachers are an obstacle or a nuisance. They should be intimidated and pushed to certify illiteracy by perfect grades. The use of student evaluation (SEI scores) by administrators in making personnel decisions on promotion, tenure and salary adjustments became the whip which keeps the faculty in line and keeps grade inflation (or to say more simple, cheating of the public) intact.

These abstract comments are not necessarily related to the Ohio State University or my department but they give a general framework all of us function in. Recently, all these thoughts came in mind when the debate about electronic SEIs and making them public online erupted at OSU. We read a series of articles in a student newspaper the Lantern about SEI forms, RMP website (ratemyprofessors.com) or rumors about federal standardized tests. A student Timo Atkinson is frank and straightforward: "When we fill out these evaluations, we answer questions that are not geared toward how much you learned, but rather instructor organization and teaching effectiveness." The students' perception of TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS has nothing to do with HOW MUCH YOU LEARNED. A teacher who is a students' hero pictured by Annie Hall gives students the grade of their own choice. As we learn on his RMP page: "The guy is flippin nuts. The class is like a quarter long circus but in the end you get to give yourself whatever grade you want". "Very easy class, but you won't learn much". "Very very great teacher." "Very amusing professor, but not very instructive." High eval rating is guaranteed.

But his colleague in Engineering College has perfect RMP rating 5.0 with the following comments: "Easiest class I've taken in a long time. ... class is four days a week, but you only have to go twice to get the material. Tests are EXACTLY like the homework, no surprises. Really nice teacher and a good guy." "Bring him a bottle of scotch and you've got an A. [happy face]" A Business College student is almost poetic: "Practice questions are for chumps, and Sample exams is how we roll". (In 1998 the NOTICES published my letter on how destructive sample tests are for undergraduate mathematical education.)

Will these pedagogical methods make the OSU a national leader in college education? Or are they, together with SEI procedures, pillars of an EDUCATION-LITE model of a store where sophisticated customers are shopping for cheaper grades and discounted diploma?

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