

Low Marks for Top Teachers

College students have a powerful say in how their teachers are graded.

Opinion

By Paul Trout

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At the end of the spring semester, college students throughout the country will rate their instructors on how well they knew the course material, showed "concern" for students, graded "fairly," etc. Administrators will then crunch the numbers and use them--with other material--to decide whether instructors deserve pay raises, retention, tenure and promotion.

Procedures may differ from department to department and campus to campus, but evaluation scores are almost always the primary way to assess teaching.

The use of numerical forms to reward and punish instructors is supposed to improve teaching, but in reality it is doing more to dumb it down than any other policy or practice on campus.

Here's how it works. Every year I compete with my colleagues for a share of merit-pay money. The amount I get depends on how a committee of colleagues evaluates the quality of my work in three areas: service, scholarship and teaching. If I "meet expectations," no bonus money, but if I "exceed expectations" in a category, I get a share. I do best, of course, if I "exceed" in all three.

In my department, to "exceed" in teaching, I have to receive high scores in each class I teach, at least 3.60 on a scale of 4. To get scores this high, I have to make a lot of students happy. There's the rub.

What makes many students happy nowadays? "Understanding" and "friendly" instructors, "comfortable" courses and "fair" grades. To translate: teachers who are not demanding, workloads that are not taxing and grading standards that are not high.

Students themselves say this on evaluation forms, and research confirms it. Studies have found that students give lower ratings to instructors that have high standards and requirements--two attributes closely associated with student learning. One study found that for every 10 percent increase in the amount of material students learned, the professor's rating decreased by a half-point. The researcher advised professors seeking a perfect rating "to teach nothing and give at least 66 percent of the class A's."

Many college students are unprepared for the rigors of higher education. Growing numbers cannot read, write or compute proficiently and have, at best, only a weak grasp of basic historical and cultural information. Students with these handicaps (but with exalted high school GPAs and plenty of self-esteem) rarely appreciate being made to read, write and reason cogently.

Even worse, many students now coming to college have almost no desire to learn, to know and understand things outside their narrow vocational interest. According to a UCLA survey, 40 percent of each freshman class is "disengaged" from educational values and pursuits. Students are inattentive, easily bored and unwilling to work hard, especially on difficult or abstract material outside their interests. Students themselves report that many of their peers "just get by and are more interested in meeting people than taking the academic seriously." One of them said that about half just "don't care."

Because of numerical evaluation forms, these students have a powerful say in how hard they are worked and graded. To get high scores, most instructors have to please them, or at least not upset them. Even a few students, angry about a demanding workload (or a C grade) can have a devastating effect on evaluation scores simply by giving an instructor "zeros" on every item, as some disgruntled students do.

Untenured and part-time instructors are especially vulnerable, because low evaluation scores can threaten their jobs. A few years ago, an untenured faculty member told me that after receiving low scores, he consciously made his course easier. "I watered it down," he said. "I did. If I weren't afraid of these teaching evaluations, I would have done it differently." Bear in mind that adjuncts now teach half of all college courses.

Tenured professors--reward-driven as anyone else outside a Trappist monastery--can also cave in to the perverse incentives of the reward system. If even Mark Edmundson, a six-figure full professor at the University of Virginia, complied with student demands for "comfortable, less challenging" classes--as he admitted doing--what sort of heroic resistance can be expected from those trying to reach a salary of \$50,000 before retirement?

No one can say precisely how many instructors have dumbed down their courses over the years. But an extrapolation from the findings of one study would suggest that a third of the 900,000 instructors in higher education may have eased their requirements and standards.

Even though there are less noxious ways than numerical evaluations to assess and improve classroom instruction, don't expect higher education to voluntarily adopt them. Too many "stakeholders" have too much invested in the present system to want to change it.

If this system is ever to be dismantled, it will have to be done by those outside the academy. It is up to taxpayers, parents, legislators, public-interest law firms and alumni to make sure that our college

graduates aren't products of Father Guido Sarducci's "five-minute university."

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