

Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College

PARITY & FAIRNESS THROUGH ADVOCACY



President's Letter

Summer 2016

By Mark James Miller, PFA President



Welcome to Summer!

I hope everyone is enjoying the summer. We just passed the Summer Solstice, that day in which the sun is directly overhead of the Tropic of Cancer and is also the longest day of the year. In Sweden people raise Maypoles in honor of the solstice; in England, neo-Druids gather at Stonehenge, and the Arctic Circle experiences 24 hours of consecutive daylight. The earth is at its farthest from the sun at this time. For the next 6 months, the days will get progressively shorter and the nights progressively longer (although it is the reverse in the Southern Hemisphere). Let's hope the summer sun continues to shine on all of us and bring us good fortune!

Grade Inflation and Student Evaluations: How One Is Connected to the Other

"A 'C' is acceptable college work," a professor told me many years ago, when I was an undergraduate. He went on to say that a 'B' was far above average, and an 'A' was reserved for truly exceptional efforts. He gave out few B's and fewer A's. A 'C' was by far the most common grade he gave.

My, how times have changed! Nowadays studies consistently find that 43% of the grades given in U.S. colleges and universities are A's. D's and F's account for only 10%. At Brown University, for example, two-thirds of all letter grades

Part-Time Faculty Association
of Allan Hancock College
Local 6185
California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers
AFL-CIO.

The PFA's goal is to achieve parity with the full-time faculty by improving pay, benefits, and working conditions of its bargaining unit members.

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are A's. Eighty percent of the grades given at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign are A's or B's. At Harvard one professor now gives two grades to each student: One that goes on the student's transcript, and the other, (usually lower) grade that the student actually earned.

In the 1950s, the average college GPA was 2.3. It ticked upward in the 1960s, the rise attributed by many at least in part to the Vietnam War: A male student who dropped out or flunked out of college could be subject to the military draft, so professors tended to give out higher grades in the hope of preventing that. GPA's went downward again in the 1970s, almost to their 1950s levels, and began rising again in the 1980s, an upward trend that continues to this day.

What accounts for this rise in student grades, or as many call it, grade inflation? Surveys show students nowadays spend more time drinking every week than they do studying (10.2 hours per week partying vs. 8.4 hours per week studying) so it's not because of any extra effort on their part. The truth is, grade inflation is no mystery. The upward surge in GPA's began at the same time the overuse of part-time or "adjunct" faculty started.

Why are part-time instructors such lenient graders? Once again, it's no mystery. A part-time teacher's continuing employment frequently hinges on two related factors: Student enrollment and student evaluations. An adjunct whose classes are consistently full and whose student evaluations are favorable can expect to keep on working. An adjunct whose classes struggle to meet enrollment minimums and who receives negative student evaluations can expect to take a trip to the unemployment office. It is as simple as that.

"Students vote with their feet," is an expression I have often heard administrators use. An adjunct who is perceived as popular with students is automatically thought to be a good instructor. But popularity comes with a cost: A teacher who demands a great deal from her students and is a hard grader is not likely to be the students' favorite, regardless of her knowledge of the subject and how effective she is as a teacher. Students will avoid her classes if they can and if asked to evaluate her, can use the anonymous evaluation process as a way to retaliate for a grade seen as too low.

Most contingent faculty have little or no job security. Administrators frequently use student evaluations as *the* determining factor in whether or not to rehire an adjunct instructor. A negative student evaluation, in other words, can be a kiss of death.

So it should come as a surprise to no one that part-time teachers do whatever they can *not* to alienate their students, and this includes giving out grades higher than the students actually deserve. One study of the issue concludes that student evaluations are "as much a measure of an instructor's leniency in grading as they are of teaching effectiveness." Another adjunct reported what many feel: That she was only "a couple of dissatisfied students away from losing her job." Other adjuncts report bumping D papers to C and C papers to B "because it meant work next semester." In another instance, an adjunct instructor (not at Hancock, thankfully) reported that in his first semester of teaching he graded and ran his classes in ways he thought were normal. The result? The students crucified him on their evaluations, and he was told by his dean that unless his evaluations improved, he could forget about teaching at this school in the future. Fearful of losing employment, he "became a teaching teddy bear" and in his classes the students could do no wrong. He gave out high grades. He ignored bad behavior. He did everything he could think of to make the students like him. The next semester, his evaluations were stellar. His dean was happy. He was rehired. And when a colleague who refused to compromise (and as a result lost her employment) accused him of being a sellout, he replied, "At least I still have a job."

Measuring good teaching is subjective and difficult, as we all know. The instructor who asks more of their students, who demands excellence, for instance, may be doing more toward helping students learn than the one who settles for mediocrity. But the teacher who demands more can end up with comments like, “very difficult grader”; “class began with 36 and finished with 10”; “I will never take her class again,” on their evaluation.

Students are not experts in the course subject matter or in pedagogy, which in nearly any other context would make them less-than-qualified as evaluators. But the trend shows no sign of going away. Until it does, we can expect grade inflation to continue.

“We Give Customers What They Want”

Many people in higher education are just fine with the concept of using student evaluations as the end-all be-all of whether a teacher is doing a good job or not. At Acton School of Business in Texas, students are unabashedly considered “customers” and the founder bluntly says “We give customers what they want... We tie teacher bonuses to our student evaluations” and “our lowest rated teachers are not invited to return.” It would be interesting to find out how much these students actually learn, and how high the turnover rate is among the instructors at this for-profit school.

Next Issue: A Closer Look at Hancock’s Evaluation Process, and How It Came About

Veteran Success Center

If you’re a veteran, you should know about the Veteran Success Center, located in room G-101, inside the student center. The friendly staff there are eager to help veterans in whatever way they can, providing services such as Veterans Education Benefits, Priority Registration, Academic Advising, and BOG fee waiver. The Center is open Monday 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Tuesday 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Wednesday and Thursday 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. For more information, you can call the center at: 805-922-6966, extension 3925, or visit www.hancockcollege.edu/veterans. They also have a Veteran’s Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255, (press 1), or text 838255.

Happy News Department

It is always nice to be able to report good news. PFA member and psychology teacher Gene Kuntz has been out of work (through no fault of his own) for many months. After initially being denied unemployment benefits, with the PFA’s encouragement he kept appealing. Finally he had his case heard by an administrative law judge, who ruled in his favor. Soon after Gene received \$7,200 in back pay and has another \$1,600 due any time. Well done Gene, persistence pays off!

Professional Development Funds For Part-Timers Exhausted

Kimberly Sargon, the PFA’s representative the Professional Development Council, reported last month that all the money set aside to enable part-time faculty to attend conferences for their professional growth has been used up. This is important because when this program was first begun some doubts were raised about whether or not part-time faculty would be interested in attending conferences related to professional development. This proves the nay-sayers wrong. More funds will most likely be provided in the summer and will be available starting when the fall semester begins. For more information, contact Kimberly at kimberly.sargon@ HancockCollege.edu.

If You Need Information on Union Benefits

Our union offers numerous benefits to its members. If you ever need information on our various benefit programs, Joe Hooper is the man to contact. You can reach Joe at jhooper@cft.org.

Summer Session Office Hours

Don't forget that if you are teaching a credit class in the summer you are entitled to office hours just as in spring or fall. If you are teaching one class, you are entitled to 45 minutes per week; if you are teaching two classes you can claim 90 minutes per week. As in fall and spring, office hours begin the first week of classes and end the second-to-last week.

Don't forget our battle cry!

