

Looking Forward

Looking Forward: Teaching as a popularity contest



By Mark James Miller, June 23, 2017

The most common grade given at Harvard University is now an “A.” Former Harvard President Larry Summers said that during his tenure “90 percent of Harvard graduates graduated with honors ... the most unique honor you could graduate with was none.”

As Harvard goes, so goes American higher education. An “A” is the grade given most frequently, 45 percent, with “B” coming in second at 35 percent. “C” is given only 15 percent of the time, marking a 180-degree turnaround from 1940, when “A” constituted 15 percent of the grades given. In 1960 the numbers were approximately the same. The real rise in “A” began in the 1980s, and has steadily continued since then.

According to research, students are studying only two-thirds as much as they did in the past, spending more time drinking and using their cell phones than they do studying, and IQs are no higher now than they were 30 years ago. So why is this happening?

The rise in grade-point averages coincides with the rise in the number of part-time or adjunct instructors in higher education, which also began in the 1980s. For many part-timers, their continued employment hinges on getting good student evaluations. And you do not get good student evaluations by being a hard grader.

In many institutions of higher learning administrators rely almost exclusively on student evaluations to gauge a teacher's effectiveness. A bad evaluation can lead to loss of employment, because most adjuncts have little or no job security. One commented recently that she felt she was only "a couple of dissatisfied students away" from losing her job. Another said he became "a teaching teddy bear" after a negative student evaluation nearly caused his dismissal. He gave every student an "A," dumbed down his curriculum, and pandered to his students every way he could.

"Call me spineless," he says, "but our students had too much power for me to afford irritating them."

Another adjunct relates how she brought ice cream and cookies to her class on evaluation day.

Student enrollment also plays a role in a part-timer's continuing employment.

"Students vote with their feet," a dean once told me, and so a teacher whose classes are full every semester has a much better chance at being rehired than one whose classes are empty.

Students have always had a grapevine that keeps them updated on who the popular teachers are, which ones grade strictly and which ones don't. With the advent of websites like "Rate My Professor" that kind of information is even more readily available. An instructor who gets a reputation as a tough

grader is an instructor who may well end up counting his empty seats in class, followed by an unwanted trip to the unemployment office.

At Allan Hancock College student evaluations are only one component of a part-time instructor's evaluation. Classroom visits by peers and the part-timer's ability to do the administrative end of her or his job, such as getting a syllabus completed on time and grades turned in when they are due, also play a role. Student evaluations do, however, carry a great deal of weight.

So, teaching in American higher education is becoming a popularity contest. A popular teacher can expect to keep on working. One who grades hard and alienates students can expect to be given the pink slip.

Higher grades do not mean more learning. It's more like a doctor telling you you're healthy because he wants to be popular, instead of telling you that you have a serious illness.

You can find out more about grade inflation at www.gradeinflation.com.

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