

Expecting More

On Elevating Academic Standards in Public Universities

ALTHOUGH IT MAY BE DIFFERENT at your institution, if you hang around public universities that have less than selective admissions policies, you are bound to hear a litany of complaints about today's students. They lack the attitude required for productive and serious academic work, and too many lack disciplined study habits; they have short attention spans and very little patience with academic work. Furthermore, they are too frequently devoid of self-criticism, unable to delay gratification, intellectually incurious, and unwilling to tolerate principled difference. Sadly, some can even wear ignorance as an entitled right.

Faculty, individually and collectively, can reassert the value of education by acting to raise academic standards

The blame game

But who's to blame for this? The popular press indicts ineffective public school teachers at the elementary and secondary levels; parents who preempt their children's problem solving and, as a consequence, erode their self-reliance; parents and teachers who insulate students from failure, resulting in unrealistically high self-esteem and an unreasonable sense of entitlement; computer games, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and similar distractions; teachers, administrators, and students who conspire to expect little from each other and fail to hold each other accountable. Other observers invoke more general sociocultural

changes, including a generational lack of empathy, an eroding work ethic, and a deepening cynicism about the value or relevance of work and educational accomplishment.

Some of this sounds very like blaming the victim, and we academicians are well advised to address our own complicity and culpability. Universities overpay "CEOs" and faculty stars, whose salaries elevate not standards but tuition and fees; teachers fear facing the risks and discomforts of maintaining appropriately high academic standards; college leaders and alumni show more interest in sports than academics; and many board members and presidents are more attendant to the interests and concerns of politicians than to the need to create educational environments that support student accomplishment. Too often, our propaganda about ourselves outstrips the academic experience we actually provide.

And, of course, political leaders rarely consider their own culpability. Postsecondary schools have suffered large and repeated cuts in state financial support. Politicians stay in power and thrive by cutting their constituents' taxes, and they portray higher education institutions as wasteful in order to justify cuts in state support. Their actions injure public universities, but the resulting burden falls even more harshly on parents and students. In terms of academic preparedness, midrange students who cannot qualify for academic scholarships must make up the deficit—they or their parents. Extreme family or student debt is one result. Another is the dramatic rise in the number of students who work twenty hours or more per week—some merely to maintain a more comfortable lifestyle, others out of necessity, but with both groups losing hours that should be devoted to academic work. Rising costs, financial and otherwise, intensify student and parent skepticism about the value of higher education.

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Academic standards

Many, perhaps most, faculty openly applaud high standards and privately disdain colleagues with weak standards and high grades. The academic culture encourages exactly the kind of remedy many faculty publicly advocate: setting high but attainable standards that students must struggle to meet and that result in accomplishments in which they can justly take pride. Many students, after all, desire to possess degrees and grades that testify to their intellectual courage, effort, and accomplishment; they want an education that measures more than mere accumulation of credit hours.

Despite acknowledging the need to expect more of students, however, individual faculty may anticipate that implementing stronger academic standards will lead to student backlash and consequent low student evaluations, hostile commentaries on RateMyProfessor.com, embarrassing grade appeals and grievances filed through a process that demeans student and professor alike, and a lower demand for their courses that will be noted disapprovingly by chairs and deans. Insofar as personnel decisions rely upon student approval, faculty, especially those without tenure, fear disadvantage if they raise standards.

Far from reassuring faculty, administrators may emphasize that enrollment and retention figures depend upon student and parental satisfaction. The subtext is inescapable: it is preferable to cut assignments, dumb down exams, and grant the marginal grade than to lose students. Individual students will surely not object; nor will their parents, most of whom simply want their children to obtain the economic advantages that accompany a college degree. These circumstances inhibit and undermine faculty efforts to develop courses in directions that improve learning.

Although public colleges may refer to traditional liberal arts ideals, their missions stress egalitarianism and democratic values that too often become confused with capitalism. Thus, to escape accusations of classism or elitism, public schools declare themselves open to business for everyone. They become enterprises accountable to their boards for efficiency and cost effectiveness, students become customers, teachers and staff devolve to merchants or mere providers of services, and parents think of themselves as consumers who pay for

degrees. The simplified democratic mission is to grant certification for middle-class employment, to train workers, and, at its most idealized, to educate for citizenship.

At elite colleges, research universities, and graduate schools, the professoriate retains its high stature. But this is not the case at regional comprehensive colleges that have adopted, even if only by default, the consumerist model in which the products for sale are grades and degrees. If eroding standards are relevant to this perspective, it is only because they debase the economic value of the degrees to which students are entitled.

Grading practices

Faculty may pay token tribute to the traditional use of grades as determining incentives, but they typically resist discussing with any particularity the grading practices of others. In private, many admit to deep resentment against colleagues who encourage students to expect unearned high grades and no serious consequence for violating the conditions or policies spelled out on syllabi. They seem to forget that they are all, of course, held hostage to each other's behavior, as students approach each new professor with attitudes and expectations created in part by previous professors. Inflated grades distort students' attitudes and undermine the credibility of higher education with graduate schools, employers, and other stakeholders. Many universities do not include grading practices in their faculty evaluations and personnel decisions. Grading policy as described in syllabi might be examined, but individual grading standards and patterns are ordinarily considered somehow to be an academic freedom that is outside anyone else's concern.

University-wide grading policies also should be reexamined in light of their contribution to discouraging student responsibility. Included here are overly generous drop and withdrawal periods, grade forgiveness options, and weakening dismissal and probation standards. One grading policy reform that merits consideration is to use the "pass-fail" system for all courses in which grades are not determined by level of academic performance but by mere attendance or participation in work experiences. The grades that accrue in any course lacking academic performance expectations have a dilatory effect on faculty efforts to strengthen standards. Grades ought to reflect

knowledge, skills, and understandings, not mere obedience to rules, short-lived memorizations for tests, or showing up regularly for an internship or practicum.

Grade inflation is commonly cited as the heart of the standards issue. However, in any particular course or class, high, even very high, grades may or may not reflect low standards, just as low grades may or may not reflect high standards. Obvi-

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ously, teachers can shift their grade distributions without truly altering their academic standards. Only careful evaluation of what students are being asked to learn and how well that learning is being assessed can determine whether standards are appropriately high. The true center of the standards issue concerns whether an instructor's grades reflect differences among students in terms of their acquisition

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of the knowledge, skills, and understandings expected of graduates of the university. But we cannot determine whether our students are learning what they should until we improve our assessment procedures and grading practices.

Although developing better assessments of meaningful educational goals will require time, some solutions to the problem of grade inflation are immediate and direct. For example, universities can record and report all students' rank within a class along with the letter grades. Certainly, a student's overall average rank would be more useful than today's highly inflated grade point averages. These transcript

changes—joined with a grading scale that assigns the C grade only to those who meet basic university-level standards, the B grade only to students who substantially exceed basic course and university expectations, and the A grade only to students who are truly outstanding—would give external parties more confidence in the honesty of our students' transcripts.

In broadest terms, the general problem of declining effectiveness and repute is best addressed by institutional self-criticism and the reassertion of core values. It should not be the mission of a university to reassure students so they can merely continue along their



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comfortable paths. Rather, universities ought to test the limits of students' learning and challenge them with the realities of their academic abilities, degrees of competitiveness, and levels of motivation. Sometimes students will come painfully to understand that they are not as talented or diligent as they have been led to believe. Many times, however, they will experience the deep satisfaction of discovering their own greater capacities.

Time to act

Even in nonselective and poorly funded institutions, faculty, individually and collectively, can



reassert the value of education by acting to raise academic standards. We offer below a list of politically and personally difficult actions that would help accomplish that important goal:

- As leaders, teachers, or colleagues, seriously examine the extent of your own complicity in the decline of academic standards.
- Develop and implement clear, tough, fair standards in your classes and assign grades that reflect levels of student performance that match the traditional meanings of A, B, C, D, and F grades—and ask your colleagues to do the same.
- Remember that the level of learning we expect of our students reflects the degree to which we take their educations seriously and the respect we have for our disciplines.
- Develop and implement a rigorous approach to the evaluation of teaching that focuses on learning outcomes and that rewards clarity and high-but-achievable academic expectations.
- Conscientiously evaluate each other's teaching, and absolutely do not delegate that important work to students via student evaluations.
- Speak truth to power—educate boards, legislators, and administrators on the limits of efficiency, of crude measures of productivity, and of the corporate model of academe.
- Through outspoken advocacy, test deans, provosts, and presidents for their commitment to establishing conditions that strongly support student learning and accomplishment.
- Resist parental and political pressure to lower expectations or standards, even at the short-term cost of decreased retention rates, longer time to degree, and smaller graduating classes.
- Strengthen admissions standards for your major programs; departments might, for example, develop standardized examinations for use in gatekeeping courses.
- Collaborate with other departments such as English, mathematics, and computer science in the identification of those minimum skill levels appropriate for admission to your major.
- Above all, patiently persuade students to share your convictions about the long-term value of a well-earned education. □

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