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Brainstorm

Ideas and culture.

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Teacher Evaluations

As the semester comes to an end at campuses across the country, students are taking advantage of their opportunity to critique the instructors who will, in the coming days, be issuing their final course grades. In a perfect world — in fact, in the world in which many of us once lived — the instructor evaluation would serve as an important tool for seeking student feedback on, for example, the organization of the syllabus, the amount of time devoted to one topic versus another, the effectiveness of new pedagogical techniques, the use of instructional technology, or even the readability of a new textbook or laboratory manual. Many years ago when I was a faculty member, I actually used to look forward to reading my students' comments, which were generally thoughtful, informative, and helpful to me in designing my course for the next semester. Sure, there was an occasional nasty comment, but comments that ranked me somewhere near God could be ignored as easily as those that put me somewhere beneath the Devil.

Then came administrative efforts to demonstrate an improved institutional focus on teacher quality. As institutions came under fire for being too focused on faculty research rather than undergraduate instruction, as *U.S. News* rankings became the primary tool by which presidents are evaluated, as policy makers began to focus on student retention and graduation rates, and as colleges and universities pushed the price of an education to the level once reserved for home ownership, colleges and universities adopted the student-as-consumer model, and the instructor evaluation took on the role of customer satisfaction survey. In other words, it no longer mattered whether or not the instructor actually both forced and helped the student learn how to balance a chemical equation or speak a difficult foreign language. Instead, the focus switched to whether or not the student, as a consumer, "liked" the experience.

Students know how to act as consumers. Look through your own evaluations to see how many times the students comment about whether or not they liked you, your class, the text, and the assigned readings as opposed to whether or not they found you to be well organized, knowledgeable about the topic, able to engage the students in a meaningful dialogue, available to answer student questions outside of class, open to a variety of opinions, rigorous but fair in your grading practices, and encouraging of the student to question his or her own notions and assumptions about what is right or how things work. Even if you ask the question in such a way as to encourage the student to rate your skill and rigor, how many times does their bubble score or written comment reflect, instead, whether or not they liked you or whether or not your class was fun? For this generation of students who are accustomed to getting their news from comedians rather than serious journalists — and for whom educational theorists had transformed their K-12 experience into one of edutainment — they may not even know how to evaluate anything other than whether or not your class made them feel good, or made them laugh, or helped the time pass by quickly, or didn't interrupt their social life too much (could they keep up with their texting and Facebook dialogues while sitting through your lectures?).

Even during my years in academe, which ended a decade ago, I saw professor behaviors starting to change in order to ensure the highest possible student-evaluation scores — which were increasingly becoming the focus of administrative decisions about things like teaching awards, promotions, office space, and in some places (though not research institutions) tenure decisions. I saw professors behave as though teaching were a popularity contest rather than a serious profession. The inclusion of Far Side cartoons in teaching materials reached an all time high — we need to entertain them — and the rigor of courses began to decline — they won't "like" us if our exams are challenging.

I actually witnessed a colleague turn a biology laboratory into a cake decorating session because she thought it would be fun for students. Sure, they might learn how to draw a cartoon version of a mitochondria with pink frosting, but will that help them understand how the mitochondria functions or its role in providing energy to the cell? Is this really college-level work? The instructor said that it was college-level work for these students because they were, after all, education majors and because the students were more likely to learn if they were having fun. This colleague was once a high-school teacher who worshiped in the church of 1980's K-12 educational theory (you know, the same theories that gave us new, new math and whole language, which robbed generations of students of computational ability and ... well ... literacy). But students were having fun and that was all that mattered.

The problem with the student-as-consumer model is that it presumes education to be a commodity or a service that can be purchased. In reality, though, paying tuition will do no more toward making one learned than buying a gym membership on January 1st will do toward making one thin. Yet somehow we empower students, through the instructor evaluation among other things, to believe that education is something that they buy and that the instructor manufactures or imparts upon them. Yes, teachers have a responsibility to teach — I never bought into that guide on the side crap — but do students understand that they have a responsibility to learn or that learning takes a lot of time and hard work?

For those administrators who really want a deeper understanding of instructor quality, there are other — better — ways of monitoring this information. First of all, pay attention to valid student complaints. If students year after year complain that a professor is always late to class, or misses important deadlines, or can't speak English well enough to explain difficult concepts and algorithms, then respond to those complaints. Take the time to follow up with both graduates and dropouts of your institution for some period of time after they leave your campus (yes, survey response rates will be low, but institutions do have an obligation to follow-up with a statistically significant, random sample of former students to evaluate the quality of the education received once the students are at a point where they can more rationally reflect upon the experience. (The week before final exams is not one that encourages particularly rational reflection.)

When possible, ask the instructors who teach higher-level courses to evaluate how well prepared your former students are to take on more challenging work. I depended on the nursing faculty to help me evaluate my effectiveness in teaching anatomy and physiology, and I also walked across campus to ask my former students for feedback, once they were well into their nursing, physical therapy, physician assistant, or occupational therapy programs. I can't tell you how many students told me that they had hated me for making them learn this or that while in my class, or that they hated my essay questions that forced them to explain what they knew rather than allowing them to select the best answer, but how grateful they are now that they are in a clinical setting and frequently put on the spot by patients and clinical professors who ask them to explain difficult concepts or justify their diagnosis or care plan.

My sense is that administrators spend a lot of time focusing on the difference between a professor who receives a 4.2 and one who receives a 4.5 – while there really is no difference, we all know that the people who score in this range can be easily manipulated to work harder since these are the people who really want to be good in the first place — while doing little to address the real problems associated with faculty who earn lower scores. This is especially the case if the low scorer is already tenured, if he or she is bringing in a lot of research dollars, or if

he or she belongs to a group that is underrepresented among the faculty. For example, a female engineering professor may be treated differently by the administration than a female psychology professor.

It is time that we help our students understand what it means to be a scholar. They know what it means to be a consumer, but we need to teach them how to be a learner. We shouldn't be shocked that they behave as consumers given that we lure them to our campuses with fancy marketing brochures that make vast promises about amenities and travel opportunities and focus little attention on learning opportunities. But at some point in the process, we need to teach them how to learn. One way to get started would be to structure instructor evaluations in a way that helps the student understand the role of the instructor, which is not to spoon-feed, to entertain, or to reduce rigor, but instead to lead, to motivate, to challenge, and to help the student question his or her own beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and knowledge.

There are lots of unintended consequences of the student-as-consumer model that dominates higher education. Perhaps most tragic is the perception among graduates that as it was once their professor's job to entertain, to provide clear and detailed instructions, to reduce expectations, to make every day fun, and to value what they think and feel over what they know and can do, it is now their boss's job. Bosses, however, tend to expect employees to figure things out on their own, to be self-motivated, and to work hard whether or not the work is fun. While professors might benefit from high evaluations when they make class fun and easy, they are robbing students of an important opportunity to learn those very skills and attitudes that will make the difference between success and failure in a tight job market.

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