

Promoting Undergraduate Academic Well-being through the Development of Inter-consistent Expectations for Student and Faculty Development

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This paper examines how poorly designed academic and administrative structures have undermined the efforts of colleges to provide quality education. Through modeling faculty motivation and behavior within the context of traditional academic structures, the root causes of academic decay are identified. Once identified, this paper proposes using Bloom's taxonomy in conjunction with structured learning objectives to align faculty evaluation, tenure criteria, student outcomes and student performance measures to inoculate the academic system and promote true student learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

This work is the result of our efforts to explain why academic quality is so elusive. It contends that the academic structure (teacher evaluation, student evaluation, tenure criteria, course structure, learning objectives, student outcomes and student performance measures) may be aligned to support the goals of the institution or to undermine them.

The challenge for an institution is to:

- establish knowledge and learning objectives so that faculty can maintain a clear vision of satisfactory student performance
- establish a structure that enhances a student's ability to recognize quality instruction
- continually educate students concerning what academic achievement truly is, so that they are empowered to critically evaluate the quality of their academic success
- create a system that allows and even encourages faculty to focus on student outcomes as a vital part of their professional development

These objectives underlie our central thesis that: *the delivery of a quality product requires both a faculty focused on quality and customers who know and demand quality.* We also assume that this is more likely to occur where the appropriate institutional frameworks exist.

II. THE PROBLEM

Consider the polar extremes of student orientated faculty behavior.

- One (Professor Vader's) who sets rigorous standards, expects excellence from students at each step, and refuse to accept as adequate lesser achievements.
- The polar opposite of this, (Professor Freud) who rewards students for effort even if it yields poor outcomes, and respond to student problems, whether personal or academic, with compassion.

Who is the academic hero? Sadly, Professor Freud is often praised, when it should be Professor Vader. Why shouldn't a campus value a Professor Freud, who has happy students, full classes, and the time and energy to pursue his research program? What is unseen is that as

students receive feedback concerning their academic efforts that is based on compassion, they will begin to decode faculty actions as indicators of quality rather than compassion. This corruption of their decoding skills will undermine academic wellbeing in the same manner that it has been found to undermine other adult wellbeing. (Carton 1999) Once compassion and evaluation are combined, students will use this low quality information as signals of academic competence. In fact the more compassionate the professor, the more students will be misguided in their academic efforts. This parallels the situation experienced within Internet research where misleading information that appears authoritative leads to poor decision making (Fornaciari 1999).

A successive series of Freuds will be inherently encouraged by the academic system to reinforce this "corrupted" view of what mastery of the material really means, and support the delusion that they are mastering it. When student ability to assess quality is compromised, they will perceive faculty who uphold standards as impediments to their success and view standards they do not meet as inappropriate. This situation will compound itself, as ill-prepared students convinced of their competence, move into courses with successively higher cognitive challenges.

Knowing that they have been certified by a Freud as prepared, an encounter with a Professor Vader will only reinforce a growing campus wide perception that such standards are unrealistic. In this way, a small infection can spread quickly throughout the system until grade inflation and quality deflation is epidemic. Few professors will attempt the personal sacrifice necessary to stop the virulence as students lose the key factor necessary for self-evaluation and improvement.

Thus, not only does Professor Freud unwittingly become the disease carrying vector but the victims flock to him. Meanwhile, we can expect that Professor Vader, who rather than allowing the infection to spread, attempts to treat those who are infected and to inoculate others, will either succumb to the disease or be placed in isolation and be made ineffective by those he is trying to immunize. Even the higher real performance which has been documented as resulting from faculty who have higher standards (Figlio 2001) will probably not offset the false signals generated by well intentioned compassionate faculty.

This occurs since traditionally designed administrative systems:

- Judge quality on the basis of student satisfaction surveys versus student achievement
- Ignore grade distributions due to academic freedom
- Honor students for GPA versus competency
- Reward faculty for full classes rather than student outcomes.

Thus the observed infection of the academic function of the university is a direct result of the structure that has been created and how it shapes faculty attention. Just as in the case of managed health care, where health plans have focused on cost containment, providing incentives that caused providers to neglect or undertreat individuals (Havighurst 2000); academic institutions have been adopting policies which create incentives that undermine academic quality.

III. A SOLUTION

This suggests that there are ways to inoculate the institution against the infection's onslaught. One possible framework for establishing an infection resistant academic structure of faculty and student evaluation that can achieve this, focuses upon constructing a curricular structure with taxonomy and knowledge objectives to use as explicit benchmarks to monitor the educational frameworks.

Using Bloom's Classification of Cognitive Skills in conjunction with the learning objectives embedded within both individual courses and the curriculum as a whole, sequences of student learning objectives can be constructed. For example, in Finance one might argue the following four-year knowledge/taxonomy sequence regarding financial ratios.

| | To be developed First Year | To be developed Second year | To be developed Third year | To be developed Forth year |
|------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Knowledge | Ability to calculate and understand financial ratios | Role of some financial ratios & use of financial statements | Use of financial statements for control & using financial ratios within that process | Utilization of financial ratios to analyze firm performance and make decisions |
| Minimum Taxonomy | Information/description | Simple applications, understanding | Analysis & Synthesis | Synthesis & evaluation |
| Course | Business math I | Accounting I | Managerial Finance | Cases in Finance |

Articulation of each knowledge sequence and identification of the courses responsible for achieving each is part of a pre-inspection of the program. Before we require students to pass through the curriculum, we should be certain that course content and sequence is capable of providing students with "deep knowledge" as opposed to "surface knowledge."

This is critical since professors must commit to the sequence and be confident that they should hold students to the upcoming cognitive and knowledge challenges. In addition, it informs students how their prior courses prepared them for these new challenges as well as clarifying the tradeoffs between current and future grades that selecting a rigorous class might entail. Once the curriculum's content is appropriately sequenced through aligning the learning objectives of each course, those objectives can be used as cognitive and knowledge benchmarks. This has been argued by others as the key to a rigorous system of self and peer review (Bernstein 2001).

Using these benchmarks, one can objectively examine whether the pedagogy employed, course materials used, and methods of student evaluation/testing are consistent with each course's desired cognitive and knowledge outcomes. One also has clear benchmarks to ascertain if student dissatisfaction with a course is caused by prior course failures as well as providing a context to examine whether the implicit signals set to students regarding quality are consistent with course objectives. Since either analysis only compares course objectives to those embodied within course materials without specifying how objectives are to be achieved, it does not tread on academic freedom. Instead, it asks faculty members to live up to the contract they have with their colleagues, the administration and their students.

While meaningful evaluation is achievable through joint faculty/administrative review of syllabi, tests and grade distributions, knowledge and cognitive benchmarks also provide a foundation for student evaluation of teacher effectiveness that is based upon learning objectives. While such a system would extend beyond traditional measures of student satisfaction, its true importance is its potential to alter student perceptions. As students are immersed in a process that

asks them to evaluate a teacher's performance strictly on the course's knowledge and cognitive challenges, they are being educated concerning what they were supposed to have achieved. This will help to enhance each student's vision of what quality is, and thus begins the process of immunizing him or her against placebo education

The second but equally vital check that must occur is an analysis of the consistency between faculty professional development and classroom objectives. This suggests that efforts designed to enhance a faculty member's ability to support their classroom cognitive missions must be counted as a vital part of faculty development. In specific, faculty who teach introductory level courses which focus on conveying knowledge/facts, having students comprehend what has been communicated and concrete applications, should be working to develop an appropriate set of skills. These may be far different from the skills needed to teach upper level courses where analysis, synthesis and evaluation are the main focal points.

Therefore, it is of critical importance for faculty who teach at each level to be encouraged to and rewarded for continually pursuing some professional development that will enhance their teaching. If administrators fail to acknowledge the importance of professional development focused upon improving teaching performance through developing appropriate administrative structures, then we should expect that faculty will be ill-prepared to and only casually interested in leading students to achieve course learning objectives.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the use of objective academic benchmarks that are supported by outcomes orientated administrative structures, it is possible to focus student and faculty efforts towards promoting academic health. Such a structure will serve the interests of students, faculty, and administrators through the incentives it generates to pursue true quality in the classroom. The challenges lie in creating a system in which faculty and administrators work together to achieve a common quality goal. It also entails empowering and motivating students to critically evaluate their achievements.

V. REFERENCES

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