

Explanatory note: I wrote this essay titled Evaluating Student Evaluations, and sent it as an email to all Faculty at my Institute, with a forwarding note, on 31 December 2011. The long citations from others are in italics and in smaller font. Vivek Moorthy, Jan 2021

From: Vivek Moorthy
Sent: 31 December 2011 02:56 PM
To: @Faculty <permanentlyFacultydl@iimb.ernet.in>
Subject: Evaluating Student Evaluations

Dear colleagues: This email has been triggered by various developments in recent months. It would be a lapse on my part to not confront the issue. This email evaluates the American experience with Student Numerical Evaluations of Teaching (called SETs or SNETs) and concludes they are academically damaging. Having written this piece about three weeks ago, I am sending it out after adequate deliberation. I may send subsequent emails discussing IIMB and PGP specific issues. I am deliberately leaving out IIMB now.

EVALUATING STUDENT EVALUATIONS

Part I THE EVOLUTION OF STUDENT FEEDBACK

Do we need some education? Do we need some thought control?.....(with due apologies to Pink Floyd)

Those who vigorously defend Student Numerical Evaluation of Teaching (SNET) feedback claim they represent market forces in education. Fee paying consumers will and should choose among their service providers based on quality and performance. This analogy is fundamentally flawed since students are far more a product than a consumer. The job of faculty is to develop, examine and certify their respective knowledge and skills. “**Value certification**” is crucial. I will come back to this later.

As a matter of fact, student feedback in a major way started in USA, which has had private universities going back over 200 years, in Berkeley **only** in the late 1960s. Prior to that, feedback was infrequent and informal, with forms devised by the faculty to improve their teaching. The anti--Establishment late 1960s was an abnormal period. As part of the campaign against the Vietnam war draft, the hippie movement took off in the Haight-Ashbury commune of San Francisco, and students started sit in protests in class rooms. (A clarification: I do like Pink Floyd and some of the music originating around “the summer of love and Haight”, but hippies rating faculty is a different matter!). Rating of faculty apart, “the previous signs of academic disaster, D and F, went by the wayside in the Vietnam era, when flunking out meant becoming eligible for the draft” (Stuart Rojstaczer)

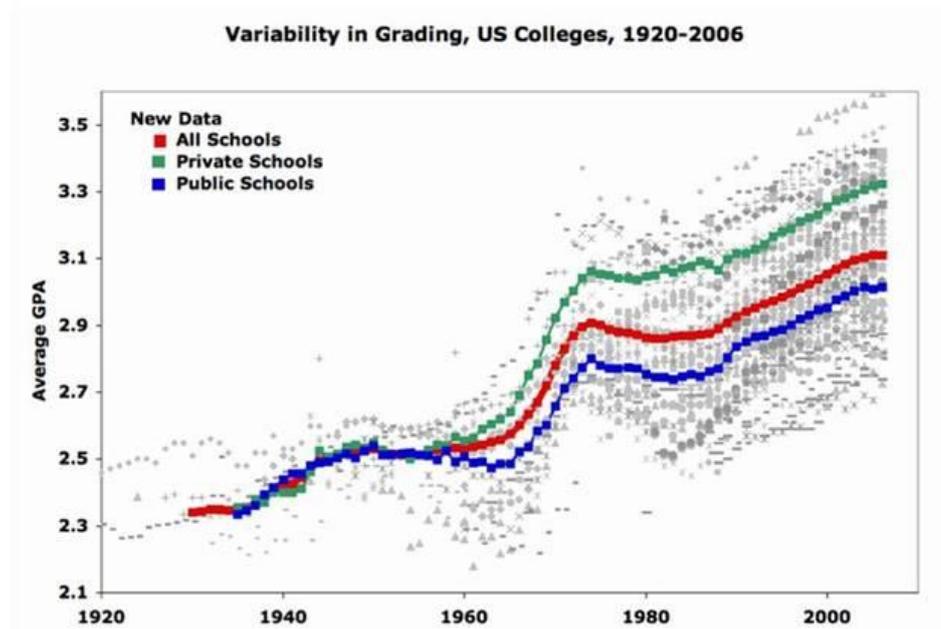
Last year, I had forwarded to you all an article: “Whatever Happened to Studying” by adding, in the Subject the title “Non Agression Pact”. The relevant passage containing that phrase is cited below: *“The problem dates back to the 1960s, said Murray Sperber, a visiting professor at the graduate school of education at the University of California at Berkeley. Sperber, at that time, was a graduate student at Berkeley and was part of an upstart movement pushing for students to rate their professors. The idea, Sperber said, was to give students a chance to express their opinions about their classes – a noble thought but one that has backfired, according to many professors. Course evaluations have created a sort of “non aggression pact” [‘ What happened to Studying”, Keith O’Brien in the Boston Globe, 4 July, 2010)*

By way of update, Sperber has written a book *Beer and Circus* about fraud in US sports universities.

Trolling through the Web, I found comments reiterating the Sperber view espoused above, and cited below:

“I was one of those who demanded that students be able to give feedback on professors back in the 1970s..The reason for teaching evaluations was to able to alert administration to the most egregious situations (professors who never showed up for scheduled classes, came to class or held office hours while drunk...,who sexually harassed students etc...The main reason was to be give students a way to report serious abuse, NOT to make higher education “consumer driven.” Nowadays with different means of communication, different teaching techniques, different rules (and laws), these most egregious abuses rarely happen....The teaching evaluation, as we now know it, should be gotten rid of.” (comments from a website cited here)

With this background, please take a close look at the Chart below from the website gradeinflation.com



Data has been compiled by Stuart Rojstaczer, cited earlier, a former geophysics professor. The Chart indicates a noticeable jump in average GPAs in the late 1960s and again in the late 1980s. The second jump has been attributed, by some of those examining these data, to the near universal adoption of SNETs by American universities and colleges around that time.

This Chart and others on the website also indicate that grade inflation is higher at **private** than public universities. A main reason is that private universities are under more pressure, internal and/or external, to make profits, and so they sell higher grades in return for higher fees. The Ivy Leagues (now tightening up) have been the worst culprits. In early 2001, about 90% of Harvard in some programs graduated with honors [See endgradeinflation.org].

Articles on grade inflation date back to the 1980s, perhaps even earlier. There has been an explosion in the amount written on this subject. I shall cite just a few articles, authors and websites. The website ratemyprofessor.com provides a good indication of what student evaluations are all about. There is seldom

any discussion of the subject, but mostly about what it takes to get an A (i.e. whether to focus on text, or class notes, or the assigned problems etc.). The comments about the top rated professors (the rankings are regularly updated) are quite illuminating. I downloaded in 2009 the first page of comments for the then top ranked professor, and can send a scanned or hard copy upon request.

Valen E. Johnson, a reputed professor of bio statistics has written a book *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education* (2004) with extensive statistical testing of the impact of grades on evaluations. He describes the use of SET numbers to evaluate teaching effectiveness an “unqualified failure (p. 145)”

Part II THE FAR BIGGER PROBLEM: COURSEWORK DEFLATION

Forensic accountants should turn their talents toward SET management. Crumbley et. al, 2010

Even without grading on a curve, users of grade information (employers etc) try to adjust to grade inflation by looking at the relative grade. (There is also grade inflation in SNETs of faculty.) If the users of the grade information have access to all the grades, then a few Excel commands can reduce grade inflation to a nuisance, nevertheless avoidable. But such information is generally not available.

Grading on a curve does not solve the problem. For starters, the worst effects of grade inflation, I think, come from passing those who ought to fail. But D’s and U’s are normally assigned on an absolute basis, the relative grading stops at the C. And within the A’s B’s and C’s, a curve is not generally and cannot be easily imposed. Good grading entails weeding out really bad students, and also identifying really outstanding ones. A 4.0 should be rare. When someone has adequate competence, whether he/she gets a B+ or A minus (depending on the grading scheme) does not matter that much for performance on the job – beyond a point, “soft skills” matter more. But bumping up those at the bottom significantly lowers the quality of graduates and adversely affects future job performance. No less crucial, the fear of failing is essential to slogging in order to learn. In a regime of “meritocratic entitlement” (it takes merit to get in, but once in, you are guaranteed to get out) learning suffers.

Even full relative grading (which may be unfair to those at the bottom who meet a minimum standard) does not solve the fundamental problem of coursework deflation, or “dumbing down”. This is impossible to control unless there is a common exam and common grader, which generally cannot be done. From basic economics, we know that when there are price controls, the quality of the product is lowered. Similarly, when there are grade controls, the quality of the course is lowered. When it comes to choosing electives, coursework deflation lowers the overall caliber of courses that are subscribed to.

Gamesmanship in teaching is widespread. As stated below,

“Semester after semester, accounting and finance professors churn out many articles on earnings management. Executives caught engaging in abusive earnings management are fined and even sent to prison (Fuller and Jensen 2010). A new profession of forensic accountants is growing to catch these unethical and executives and fraudsters. Yet, semester after semester, professors are engaging in abusive SET management,

resulting in grade inflation and coursework deflation. These same professors are rewarded, given tenure, and promoted. Why is earnings management illegal and unethical, and yet SET management by professors is not condemned by academics? (“What is Ethical About Grade Inflation and Coursework Deflation?” Crumbley, Flinn and Reichert, Journal of Academic Ethics, Nov 2010, pg. 5)

Donald L. Crumbley, one of the authors above, holds a KPMG Chair in accounting at Louisiana State University. His website “Society for a Return to Academic Standards” has some of the best posts on these matters – the “Evolution of Teaching Business” from the 1950s to 1990s is quite hilarious.

PART III SHOULD STUDENTS BE TREATED AS PRODUCTS OR CONSUMERS?

“I am your boss, I pay your salary” a student’s words recounted by Emery, Kramer and Tian, 2001

In a post, which has drawn some many outraged responses from some students, Donald Crumbley stated,

“Students are the inventory. The real stakeholders in higher education are employers, society, the people who hire our graduates. But what we do is ask the inventory if the professor is good or bad. “. At General Motors, he says, “you don’t ask the cars which factory workers are good or bad. (Rating Your Professors: Scholars Test Improved Course Evaluations)

Those who talk about student consumers shopping for the service providers should not complain about this analogy. The “Don’t ask the cars” analogy of Crumbley is useful only up to a point. Cars do not pay fees, and do not sit in classes, but students do. But since a student is more a product than a consumer, one primary role of faculty is to be **quality controllers**, not entertainers or customer service providers.

How faculty should be evaluated, and how student feedback can be factored into this evaluation, is a complex issue that needs to be addressed. This email is about how faculty should **not** be evaluated.

Overall, one thing is crystal clear – the conflict of interest in students numerically grading their faculty is so fundamental, direct and overwhelming that SNETs (Numerical evaluations, as distinct from specific feedback etc). Even if SNETS are not used for the promotion and tenure of faculty, conducting them damages the whole educational process – teaching content, difficulty of exam and grading.

Larry Summers, former President of Harvard has succinctly stated “what can be counted, counts.” To build on that, in my opinion, “count only that which is worth counting.” Once a number is computed, it tends to be scrutinized by administration and others, even if they claim otherwise. Even if the reported number does not affect decisions, it will be taken seriously by students and faculty, may affect morale, and is likely to affect enrollments. Overall, evidence from four decades show that the costs of SNETs for education vastly exceed their ostensible benefits.

To conclude, when trade unions greatly influence the running of a company, efficiency goes for a toss. When “grade unions” greatly influence the whole exam and grading and grade reporting process, then academics goes for a toss. When the graded become the graders, academic Dgradation is the result.

Words ought to be a little wild, for they are the assaults of thought upon the unthinking”. (John Maynard Keynes, July 1933)

(Not always my favourite economist, but my favourite quotation from his post 1931 writings).

With regards and wishing you a happy new year!

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