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## How to Sacrifice Academic Quality

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There is a tendency for one who has not been unsuccessful in performing the same sort of skilled or professional task for, say, thirty years to feel he must be doing it correctly, whatever it may be. The neurosurgeon, the optometrist, the college professor who has a thirty year track record is usually confident that he is performing in a competent manner. Anyone who has considered the need for peer review and specialized or continuing education knows that this is not always true. It may be that the confident individual has not experienced other methods or techniques, and his confidence is based on a success which may be limited rather than maximal.

As a professor teaching in the School of Optometry for some thirty years I've found new pressures to improve my teaching. The pressure came in the form of a student rating of professors which has been described at length (see references). At first I did not pay much attention to it because it seemed obvious to me that student ratings, as opposed to peer review, were more rewards for popularity or tutoring than for the presentation of high quality, high standard, academic fare.

However, the pressure was forcefully brought to my attention by the Dean at that time (who himself did poorly

in this contest) when he made it brutally clear that my position in the university depended upon these ratings. Naturally I then tried to determine how I could improve my ratings and still provide my students with what I considered to be a high quality academic diet.

Three facts stood out. Those faculty members who had the highest ratings were: (1) performing as "nice guys," (2) providing a high degree of tutoring at the expense of breadth and profundity in the limited time available, and (3) presenting material which was either essentially clinically oriented or appeared to be.

It should be noted that it is not unreasonable that students in the School of Optometry want to be proficient in their future professional activity, and therefore are extremely oriented toward clinically allied subjects and presentations. The students are a fine lot as I believe they always have been. Today they seem to be more sophisticated than in years past and have perhaps as good an academic background as ever, if not better. This may be due in part to the great competition for matriculation in professional schools. However, I like the students and hope they like me. There is no pejorative intent in saying that students are relatively naive. We all are in various ways, and until we have experience in some behavior or field it is difficult to be sophisticated. The students, having not already been through their course of study and having not gone into practice or into teaching, must, therefore, be relatively naive about many of the aspects of the curriculum. It is no

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criticism of them to say that they prefer clinically oriented material to purely academic material, even when they cannot always tell the difference, in many cases, because of their lack of background and experience. In a similar fashion, it is no criticism of a small child to point out that when given the choice, without guidance or direction, he will usually choose candy rather than nutritious food. He hasn't the background to know enough about the relevance of nutrition. The responsibility lies with the parent who sees that the child gets balanced, nutritious meals rather than sweets as a substitute. Similarly, the college professor or administrator must see that the student gets a broad and profound education that is not replaced by tutoring, bogus clinical promises, and gimmicks.

### Raising the Ratings

Since I was being forced to raise my ratings, I decided to do what some of the other "successful" instructors were doing and try to demonstrate that my very low ratings, in the lower ten percentile, were not a result of an inability to teach well, but simply resulted from a choice of attempting to present a rich academic program rather than lecturing flimflam. In order to do this, I set up a plan.

I was told by a colleague of mine, in discussing the high ratings of some of our other colleagues, that there were some cardinal points. He said, "I've listened to Professor X and he ties everything to the clinic, no matter how far-fetched or absurd. If the students start demanding more in the way of specific clinical information," my colleague went on, "he says it is too clinical and will be presented in a later course." He also said that the technique seems to be to pay attention to questions, never rush, answer even the most stupid ones (where the student has done no outside study or reading) in great detail. Even though this may eat into the time necessary to present a full, or profound explanation of the material, sacrifice that. In other words, don't present material so much as tutor.

He also said, "Be sure the students are not concerned. Don't be overly concerned about grades and let them know in advance you do not use grades punitively, so they are not worried about the course grade. Make it a happy experience, rather than a chore." To his advice I added

- (1) Maximize the humor by puns, jokes, and humorous slides
- (2) increase interest by giveaways and contests
- (3) never rush, teach as if there were infinite hours available regardless of what may have to be omitted
- (4) emphasize the National Boards as being a reason for everything, including examinations and any material that cannot be palmed off as clinically significant.

In addition, tutor on National Board questions. Rather than "make an enemy of the students," in the phrase of the Chinese cultural revolutionists, since examinations must be given, use the National Board as the whipping boy. One can in this way avoid an adversary position.

The questions can be made palatable merely by presenting them as being practice for the National Boards. The

style of the question and its simple objective approach is done in the fashion of the National Board. Point out that some of the examination questions have been on the National Board Examination and others probably will be. As a result, you are not testing the students, you are not forcing them to perform, you are simply helping them prepare for the National Boards.

### Incentives

At the beginning of the quarter I gave a cookie to each student labelled "ERG 100" to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the first human electroretinogram. On St. Valentine's day I passed out daisies. (Some students anonymously gave me a Valentine which was gratifying.) Three contests were devised: answer in one page or less the following three sentences: a) Marg is the best teacher because . . . b) Marg is the worst teacher because . . . c) Marg can become the best teacher by . . . .

These contests provided good feedback for me to see how the students thought I was performing, and at the same time provided a diversion from the usual lectures, which reached its climax, of course, during the presentation of the awards. From this feedback I learned that some of my "National Board" questions were ambiguous. (I had never in the past given multiple choice, objective questions of that type. I feel that brief essays, graphs and definitions are at least as good and may even be a better measure of an understanding of the material.) Apparently by the time of the final examination I could do a better job. Secondly, I learned that while some of the students understood, as I told them plainly, that I was running for "best teacher" and for a high student rating, some thought perhaps I was trying too hard. Nevertheless, they did not seem to realize they were getting approximately one third less material and certainly fewer details, for example, a notable lack of authors and dates of discoveries, which my previous classes received. In fact, there were some comments that indicated they thought they were getting too many names and dates, although I gave virtually none. They liked any clinical tie-in and applications I presented even though some of them may have been unrealistic or somewhat far-fetched. However, from their viewpoint this added to the excitement of the lectures.

### Awards

The three awards were polished mahogany pedestals with brass plates giving the name of the award and the name of the recipient. On top of each pedestal was placed a genuine prosthetic eye. The first award for "Marg is the best teacher because. . ." was a good prosthetic eye which was clear and therefore called the *Clear-Eye Award*. The award for "Marg can become the best teacher by. . ." had a prosthetic eye that was slightly bloodshot and therefore called the *Pink-Eye Award*. The third, "Marg is the worst teacher because . . .," had a greenish hue to it

and was called the *Jaundiced-Eye Award*. Secondary prizes consisted of three blinking doll's eyes with a Cyclopiian eye effect. Everyone in the class was also awarded a neatly tissue-wrapped doll's eye with lashes that opened and closed in response to the gyration of the device

The final gift was presented the period before the ratings were taken. This consisted of a plastic ruler with both inch and millimeter markings inscribed "MARG FOR BEST TEACHER" and underneath "HE GIVES MORE." These are handy devices for optometry students, who use millimeter rulers in their clinical work for measuring the distance between the eyes and the sizes of lenses and frames. What could be more useful and suggestive?

## Rewards

When I received my ratings, I found that despite the fact that the raters had arbitrarily thrown out one of the student response sheets because of indiscriminately high marks (!), I am now among the "best"; indeed, I'm in the top ten percentile.

This is the first time I have been ashamed of my performance as a teacher. I feel my standards have been reduced. Although I must say that there was a better camaraderie or *esprit de corps* in my class I doubt it was worth the price. The experiment was in effect at the forceful behest of an administrator. The only loser in this experiment has been the students, and of course, they think they have gained, not lost!

## Sacrifices

If the university is sincere about pursuing excellence, something needs to be done. In political terms there is no constituency for excellence anymore. The bastion for excellence rests in the professor, but the administration is twisting his arm to lower his standards because of public and student pressures for "better teaching."

It should not be interpreted that I am advocating no review of the quality of teaching. On the contrary, peer review has always been important, and the problem has been that it has been difficult to quantify. To use student review for information for the professor who tries to understand how students are reacting to his material is indeed a laudable idea. But to use student reaction to govern the level of the professor's presentation is too extreme.

In summary, I found that I had the ability to win a student popularity contest by reducing the quality of my teaching. It may be that teaching two-thirds of the material in a "happy" environment leads to a greater comprehension, especially among the poorer students in the class. I doubt it. Certainly it cannot be true of those who show mastery of the full course. I can only hope that the university administrators who are pushing professors into this lowering of standards can be persuaded by my experiment to reverse their pressure for degradation of academic achievement at the University of California.

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