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The Academic Success Entitlement

By John V. Lombardi September 26, 2007 11:20 am

At one time, we imagined that students came to the university to learn, that they had an obligation to engage their courses and faculty, read, write, study, take

exams, and demonstrate their achievement. This simple approach placed the responsibility for learning on the students who we assumed recognized that the privilege of attending a college carried with it a commitment to the learning process. We expected the faculty to know their subject, prepare for class, provide support and advice, hold office hours, give fair and effective examinations, mark papers with care, and provide a grade that reflected what the students had learned. This simple formulation has suffered considerable modification over the years.

Today we believe students are entitled to attend college, that they have a right to achieve a standard level of academic accomplishment, and that the institutions have an obligation to ensure that their learning meets this standard by the time they leave. The obligation to guarantee student learning and graduation is sometimes explicitly articulated, but more often appears through measures applied to demonstrate institutional success. Graduation rate, for example, is seen as a measure of institutional effectiveness and anticipates that the institution will guarantee student learning at a level acceptable for graduation and successful entry into the world of work. In this formulation, the students' responsibilities lie in attendance, but their academic success becomes the responsibility of the institution. When graduation rates are low or students fail to meet some testable standard, we assume that the institution failed, not that the student failed. Indeed, if the student fails, the remedy is to punish the institution and its teachers.

The academic success entitlement that students enjoy reflects a broader belief that institutions need to guarantee results not opportunity. This is a notion borrowed from the manufacturing world where we demand guarantees that the products we buy be free of defects and that all products of a certain type perform their functions in the same predictable and standardized way. This model, while effective for mass produced items constructed out of standard malleable materials where the producer controls the conditions of production, has little to do with high quality education. In a high quality educational context, as we who live here know, the academic enterprise requires the direct and responsible participation of student and teacher. Neither can fail, for if the student is lazy, poorly prepared, or just doesn't care, the academic result will be poor no matter how expert the teacher. Similarly, if the teacher is incompetent, lazy, or unprepared, the academic result will also be poor no matter how responsible the student. When we place all the responsibility for academic success or failure on the institution and its teachers, exempting the student s, we create an engine capable of predictable mediocre performance.

Our difficulty in restoring the authority of the university and its faculty in the definition of academic accomplishment, and

the consequent intrusion of external agencies in the measurement of institutional success, reflects our own ambivalence about measuring and evaluating our own performance. We know quite a bit about learning and how it takes place, but most institutions are reluctant to institute programs that review and assess faculty teaching performance. While the faculty may well be doing a terrific job, updating their courses every year, adopting new teaching techniques that leverage technology and research on student learning, and otherwise performing at a high level, our ability to demonstrate this effectiveness is minimal. Mostly, what we see are outstanding examples, drawn from the work of a number of dedicated faculty with the commitment of teaching resource centers. These wonderful people and their support enterprise capture the enthusiasm of some subset of faculty, but we rarely find comprehensive institution-wide faculty teaching assessments that build confidence in the faculty part of the student-faculty collaboration. To be sure, we have student evaluations of teaching, but as almost everyone knows, these are weak tools for measuring instructional effectiveness although they often identify the outliers (very bad and very good teachers). More elaborate forms of evaluation that employ expert reviewers of faculty teaching performance are rare indeed.

We know that such reviews are expensive and time consuming (although we also know that we do this type of reviewing for research productivity and effectiveness). We know that absent significant rewards for faculty teaching performance, few faculty or institutions want to make the investment or support the controversies that will surround designing an effective process. But we are also very short sighted in this.

The external constituencies that will demand exit testing and various other forms of standardized evaluation of institutional teaching effectiveness will require expensive tests. What they test will often be the wrong things. The consequences of these tests, which will stigmatize some institutions as ineffective and their faculty as poor teachers based on perhaps wrong-headed criteria, will prove expensive for the institutions and their faculty.

Our failure to take full ownership of the issue of teaching and learning effectiveness and evaluation, recognizing both the student and teacher as required partners in producing success, gives influence to meddling bureaucrats with often ideological agenda, empowers academic entrepreneurs exploiting our abdication of responsibility by selling us the latest in testing methodologies, and further erodes the authority of the university and its faculty and their ability to determine the definitions of academic quality.