

Who Really Failed?

Scott Jaschik

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Dominique G. Homberger won't apologize for setting high expectations for her students.

The biology professor at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge gives brief quizzes at the beginning of every class, to assure attendance and to make sure students are doing the reading. On her tests, she doesn't use a curve, as she believes that students must achieve mastery of the subject matter, not just achieve more mastery than the worst students in the course. For multiple choice questions, she gives 10 possible answers, not the expected 4, as she doesn't want students to get very far with guessing.

Students in introductory biology don't need to worry about meeting her standards anymore. LSU removed her from teaching, mid-semester, and raised the grades of students in the class. In so doing, the university's administration has set off a debate about grade inflation, due process and a professor's right to set standards in her own course.

To Homberger and her supporters, the university's action has violated principles of academic freedom and weakened the faculty.

"This is terrible. It undercuts all of what we do," said Brooks Ellwood, president of the LSU Chapter of the American Association of University Professors, and the Robey H. Clark Distinguished Professor of Geology. "If you are a non-tenured professor at this university, you have to think very seriously about whether you are going to fail too many students for the administration to tolerate."

Even for those who, like Homberger, are tenured, there is a risk of losing the ability to stick to your standards, he said. Teaching geology, he said, he has found that there are students who get upset when he talks about the actual age of the earth and about evolution. "Now students can complain to a dean" and have him removed, Ellwood said. "I worry that my ability to teach in the classroom has been diminished."

Kevin Carman, dean of the College of Basic Sciences, did not respond to requests for a phone interview Wednesday. But he issued a statement through the university's public relations office that said: "LSU takes academic freedom very seriously, but it takes the needs of its students seriously as well. There was an issue with this particular class that we felt needed to be addressed."

"The class in question is an entry-level biology class for non-science majors, and, at mid-term, more than 90 percent of the students in Dr. Homberger's class were failing or had dropped the class. The extreme nature of the grading raised a concern, and we felt it was important to take some action to ensure that our students receive a rigorous, but fair, education. Professor Homberger is not being penalized in any way; her salary has not been decreased nor has any aspect of her appointment been changed."

In an interview, Homberger said that there were numerous flaws with Carman's statement. She said that it was true that most students failed the first of four exams in the course. But she also said that she told the students that -- despite her tough grading policies -- she believes in giving credit to those who improve over the course of the semester.

At the point that she was removed, she said, some students in the course might not have been able to do much better than a D, but every student could have earned a passing grade. Further, she said that her tough policy was already having an impact, and that the grades on her second test were much higher (she was removed from teaching right after she gave that exam), and that quiz scores were up sharply. Students got the message from her first test, and were working harder, she said.

"I believe in these students. They are capable," she said. And given that LSU boasts of being the state flagship, she said, she should hold students to high standards. Many of these students are in their first year, and are taking their first college-level science course, so there is an adjustment for them to make, Homberger said. But that doesn't mean professors should lower standards.

Homberger said she was told that some students had complained about her grades on the first test. "We are listening to the students who make excuses, and this is unfair to the other students," she said. "I think it's unfair to the students" to send a message that the way to deal with a difficult learning situation is "to complain" rather than to study harder.

Further, she said that she was never informed that administrators had any concerns about her course until she received a notification that she was no longer teaching it. (She noted that the university's learning management system allowed superiors to review the grades on her first test in the course.)

And while her dean authorized her removal from teaching the course, she said, he never once sat in on her course. Further, she said that in more than 30 years of teaching at LSU, no dean had ever done so, although they would have been welcome.

"Why didn't they talk to me?" she asked.

Homberger said that she has not had any serious grading disputes before, although it's been about 15 years since she taught an introductory course. She has been teaching senior-level and graduate courses, and this year, she asked her department's leaders where they could use help, and accepted their suggestion that she take on the intro course.

In discussions with colleagues after she was removed from the course, Homberger said that no one has ever questioned whether any of the test questions were unfair or unfairly graded, but that she was told that she may include "too many facts" on her tests.

Ellwood, the campus AAUP chapter president, said that his group had verified that no one informed Homberger of concerns before removing her from the course, and that no one had questioned the integrity of her tests. He also said that the scores on the second test were notably

better than on the first one, suggesting that students were responding to the need to do more work. "She's very rigorous. There's no doubt about that," he said.

Based on its investigation, the AAUP chapter has sent a letter to administrators, arguing that they violated Homberger's academic freedom and due process rights and demanding an apology. (No apology has been forthcoming.)

Cary Nelson, national president of the AAUP, said that the organization has always believed that "an instructor has the responsibility for assigning grades," and that the LSU case was "disturbing in several respects." He noted that "the practice of assigning tough grades in an early assignment as a wake-up call to students is quite common" and that "the instructor made it clear that she had no intention of failing that many students when it came time for final grades."

If administrators were concerned, he said, they had a responsibility to "discuss the matter fully with the instructor" before taking any action. And he said that "removal from the classroom mid-semester is a serious sanction that requires all the protections of due process." Nelson said that the incident "raises serious questions about violations of pedagogical freedoms."

Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke University professor who is the founder of GradeInflation.com, a Web site that publishes research on grading, questioned whether LSU was really trying to help students. "How many times has Dean Carman removed a professor from a class who was giving more than 90 percent As?" he asked.

LSU's public affairs office did not respond to follow-up questions about the statement it issued, and to the criticisms made by various faculty members.

Homberger declined to give out the names of students who have expressed support, saying that to do so would violate her confidentiality obligations. But she released (without student names) answers to a bonus question on the course's second test. The question asked students to describe "the biggest 'AHA' reaction" they had had during the course.

Many of the reactions were about various issues in biology -- with evolution as a major topic. But a number dealt with grades and work habits. One was critical: "When I found out my test grade, I almost had a heart attack."

But many other comments about the course standards were positive, with several students specifically praising Homberger's advice that they form study groups. One student wrote: "My biggest AHA-reaction in this course is that I need to study for this course every night to make a good grade. I must also attend class, take good notes, and have study sessions with others. Usually a little studying can get me by but not with this class which is why it is my AHA-reaction."

Commentary

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Scott Jaschik's (2010) article "Who Really Failed?" details the experience of Dominique Homberger, a tenured faculty member at Louisiana State University (LSU) who was removed from teaching her introductory biology course citing student complaints in regards to "the extreme nature" of the grading policy. This removal has sparked a debate, where topics such as **academic freedom, grade inflation, and evaluation of teaching** have emerged to the forefront of the discussion.

With respect to **academic freedom**, Homberger's supporters argue that this dismissal "violated principles of academic freedom and weakened the faculty." They argue that LSU's decision has sent a message that failing students can be grounds for removal from teaching responsibilities, disrupting the principle that each professor can set their own academic standards. Literature suggests that it is much harder for a professor to give a low grade than a high grade (Johnson, 2003; Tucker & Courts, 2010). Thus, it is argued that professors (in particular adjunct faculty and untenured) feel compelled to ensure that every student receives passing grades because of fears of sanctions and penalties, risk of losing their course, having to address student complaints, and having fewer students chose to take their course (Abbott, 2008; Chen & Cheng, 1999; Mabalay, 2007).

Abbott (2008) indicates that academic freedom has already been infringed upon by the current grading structure, with **grade inflation** emerging as a deterrent for academic excellence. Ackerman, Gross, and Vigneron (2009) remind us that: "faculty members might feel tempted to grade more leniently, especially before tenure, because they felt pressured to improve or maintain their student evaluations" (p. 30). Even tenured faculty may feel pressured to guarantee that a substantial number of students receive high grades. This phenomenon, known as grade inflation, occurs when colleges and universities "deflate the actual, real value of an A, so that it becomes an average grade among college and university students" (Tucker & Courts, 2010, p. 45). At a national level, college students' grades and GPAs have been on the rise since the 1960s, increasing an average of 0.10 to 0.15 each decade (Hu, 2005).

When interpreted on the grounds of grade inflation, it is argued that millennial students expect high grades and are "increasingly optimistic about their chances for academic success in college" (Sax, 2003, p. 17). However, they only do what is expected (Sax, 2003). As stated by Dr. Homberger, her strict grading policies existed to motivate students to work harder. Supporting this rationale, she pointed to one student in her class that reflected upon her experience by stating: "I need to study for this course every night to make a good grade. I must also attend class, take good notes, and have study sessions with others. Usually a little studying can get me by but not with this class..." (Jaschik, 2010). This comment aligns with what appears to be a national phenomenon, with students expecting high grades but dedicating little time to studying. *The American Freshman*, an annual report based on data from the CIRP survey, revealed that there has been a decline in the amount of time that students are spending on homework and

studying. In 1987, 47% of college freshman reported studying six or more hours a week during their senior year of high school, compared to 32.8% of freshman in 2006 (HERI, 2008, p. 2).

On the other hand, when developing examinations and assessing how much students have learned in the course, instructors must consider that tests and examinations are tools that could be used beyond purely measuring student knowledge. When designed properly, tests and examinations can help students connect concepts, reflect upon course material, and provide feedback to facilitate learning (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). This speaks to the fact that a "discernible shift from a focus on teaching to an emphasis on student learning has taken place in many corners," encouraging instructors to develop engaging pedagogies conducive to student success (Schuh, Ku, Kinzie, Whitt, & Associates, 2010, p. 69). For instance, Dr. Homberger cited that she included a bonus question on the course's second test which asked students to describe "the biggest 'AHA' reaction" they had during the course. This is precisely the type of question that must guide instructors when developing the syllabus, classroom expectations, lesson plans, and examinations. This type of question will place student learning as a priority, improving "continuously the quality of learning for students individually and in the aggregate" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p.15).

Evaluation of Teaching

To cultivate excellence in our academic communities, faculty members must have clear and established tenure and promotion guidelines. As Gould (2011) indicates, "It is inexcusable that any school should have assistant professors floundering in the dark about what is required for tenure. It is inexcusable that any corner of academia has allowed the process to overcome the purpose" (p. 50). Incorporating the following elements to evaluate teaching could help pre-tenure and tenured faculty fulfill their role as educators, facilitating a life-long learning experience for all faculty:

First, mid-term and full-term student evaluations of teaching (SET) can emerge as a valuable tool to provide formative feedback to instructors (Ackerman, et al., 2009). While some may question the validity of student responses to SET, students are the best source at identifying if they in fact did learn in a class (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006), and research suggests that students are "honest in their evaluations and that SETs are effective measures of teaching" (Brown, 2008, p. 178). Unfortunately, the impact and formative value of SET today is limited because they are utilized only "to collect data for personnel evaluation" (p.351). Zabaleta (2007) states that "the numerical values of those evaluations should not be used in critical personnel decisions such as retention, tenure and promotion of faculty, unless they are properly interpreted within a sound theory of teaching effectiveness" (Zabaleta, 2007, p. 55). This argument is based on research revealing that "the relationship between student evaluations and the actual merits of teaching performance has not been clearly identified" (Zabaleta, 2007, p. 55). In addition, the format of the evaluation can also limit its usefulness. For example, the same SET have been distributed in courses that are of different sizes, cover different material, and have little in common (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006), precluding instructors from receiving relevant feedback to improve their teaching pedagogy.

Second, peer evaluations and classroom visits offer a valuable resource to assist new and seasoned professors. McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) recognize the value of peer evaluation and suggest that “peers are among the best sources of ideas” (p. 347). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that regardless of years of experience as instructor (i.e., instructors with one year of experience or less could obtain higher SET scores than tenured professors (Zabaleta, 2007)), “talking about teaching with colleagues can be an invaluable source of ideas as well as provide emotional support when a class hasn’t gone well” (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, p. 347). In Professor Homberger's case, she pointed out that in discussions with colleagues after she was removed, “no one has ever questioned whether any of the test questions were unfair or unfairly graded, but that she was told that she may include ‘too many facts’ on her tests” (Jaschik, 2010). In retrospect, a peer evaluation could have helped Dr. Homberger refine her evaluation methods, share ideas, voice concerns, and seek additional support, in particular considering that Dr. Homberger had not taught an introductory course in 15 years.

Third, it is necessary to create a culture where faculty and students view SET as a tool to improve faculty performance. Effective SET allow the student to communicate what they learned or did not learn in a class. As McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) emphasize, “We haven’t taught well if students haven’t learned” (p. 348). However, for evaluations to fulfill the purpose of helping faculty to grow as instructors, students must provide constructive criticism and avoid focusing purely on negative aspects of the course. SET that provide constructive criticism can enable faculty to engage in a process of deep self-reflection, and re-evaluate conceptual frameworks, course content, and instructional pedagogies that seek to engage all students (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, p. 357). To support this self-reflection process, one alternative is to require instructors to engage in self-reflections about their teaching that draw upon student comments from SET. This practice can focus on areas such as content, methodology, and assessment, offering faculty the opportunity to refine their teaching philosophy taking into consideration student feedback. A recommended practice is that of creating a portfolio, where faculty can focus on goals, strategies, and learning outcomes, reflect upon their strengths and weakness, enhancing their capacity to promote continuous development as instructors (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006).

In conclusion, to fully support faculty, collaborative efforts are needed to craft clear and specific guidelines, to open channels of communication, to develop formal and informal avenues to consult, discuss, and provide feedback, and to foster an academic community that protects high academic standards, without disregarding the importance of fulfilling student needs. The article discussed in this commentary opens the door for discussion in several topics, highlighting that academic freedom, academic excellence, and student concerns cannot be protected in isolation.

References and Suggested Readings

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Discussion Questions

For those that may wish to use this article for teaching and/or professional development related purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. Regarding academic freedom, in what ways may adjunct faculty feel more restricted in assigning grades when compared to tenured faculty? What can be done to diminish this type of pressure on adjunct faculty?
2. Research suggests that grade inflation occurs at higher rates in private institutions (Tucker & Courts, 2010). Do you think institutional type influences grade inflation? How?
3. What types of data could aid administrators in determining if grade inflation is impacting their university?
4. How can student evaluations be restructured to better serve students and faculty? What type of questions can provide instructors with formative feedback? What systems could be implemented to ensure that instructors seriously consider and utilize the feedback provided?
5. How might a system of peer evaluation assist in the protection of academic freedom, while also fostering the development of a more effective teaching pedagogy?
6. Have student complaints about challenging courses been given too much weight in decision making? What message are students receiving about the importance of hard work and studying to earn a degree?