The Irascible Professor[SM]

Irreverent Commentary on the State of Education in America Today

by Dr. Mark H. Shapiro

"Slackers are waiting for their ship to come in, but they haven't wandered down to the docks to meet it. Most times their ship doesn't travel by water anyway."... ...Slacker proverb.

Commentary of the Day - July 28, 2008: Slacker Profs Make for Slacker Students. Guest commentary by Herbert Jack Rotfeld.

High schools increasingly require high stakes testing before students are allowed to graduate. Primary educators face public evaluations from "No child left behind" legislation whose questionable means seek the laudable goal of ensuring that students learn to read and write. Yet colleges and university employees argue that such concerns are unnecessary for them; we don't need to assess how well students learn, or so they say. And, the reviews of college education often overlook the fields where most students actually seek degrees. Liberal arts and humanities faculty receive the most assessment attention, since they teach core general education courses, yet those fields house ever-declining numbers of student majors. The more popular business courses seem immune from scrutiny.

Many students enrolled in business courses choose their majors from a mistaken sense that they need courses in marketing or finance to get a job when they graduate. And the business faculty are blessed by the gifts of the marketplace, rewarding us for the large numbers of undergraduate students that crave to have a credit for our courses noted on their transcripts. To encourage us to select their textbooks, publishers provide the tools we need to be faculty slackers and provide courses that are popular with student slackers. And if the instructor can also claim a small amount of talent as an entertainer, the path is set for him or her to win teaching awards.

For some business subjects, publishers will provide enough video materials to fill huge blocks of class time, reducing the need to prepare lectures or plan discussions. Of course, some disciplines are more blessed than others -- it is easier to create inexpensive video packages with collections of advertising for Marketing classes than it is to

provide videos on Accounting or Finance. But regardless of discipline area, instructors receive PowerPoint displays of text and figures from the textbook, plus teaching guides, case examples and outlines of the chapters to be used for lectures. They tell you what discussion questions to ask the students.

To maximize faculty slackerdom in test preparation, publisher-provided computer programs with multiple-choice or true-false questions do not even require instructors to actually read the questions. The program will select them automatically following simple heuristic guides, such as the number of questions to draw from each chapter. As a result, the slacker teacher avoids any mental involvement with either the material or the students.

These instructor packages do have some positive values. They help a first time teacher get started. The data banks provide a useful template on which to base exams for large-section classes. Even if an instructor ignores the data bank and writes original questions, the program provides a useful way to store questions for multiple uses or to scramble questions and choices to making it difficult for students to copy answers off someone seated nearby.

Unfortunately, when instructors never add their own materials or use test questions unaltered from those found in the packages, students only need to read the textbook and memorize its printed lists.

It must be admitted reluctantly that teaching in this fashion is popular among students. At any university, students will fight to get into the class sections that use multiple choice exams drawn from the textbook while instructors will relate that having a syllabus listing essay tests leads to an immediate loss of one-fourth of the students after the first class. As the predominant measures of teaching effectiveness become students' evaluations of the teachers as expressed on forms they fill out on the last class day, it should surprise no one that the faculty become focused on doing what the students find pleasing.

This problem is not new.

Many years ago, at another university Before Personal Computers, I raised the ire of my department head for my teaching decisions in a course using a textbook he wrote. I brought in extra materials. I had the audacity to give essay exams, which he insisted reduced enrollment in the elective course and, in turn, sales of his book. His actual words were that he "couldn't understand" why I wanted to do what he felt was unnecessary extra work of writing and grading exams. He said I should, "Just tell the secretary to retype every other true-false question from the manual." For the next term, the department head took on teaching all sections of the course with his book. Enrollments did increase, and I periodically saw his secretary with the teachers' manual next to her typewriter as she copied the questions for his next test.

Admittedly, body counts are often important on campus and some administrators who are not selling their textbooks tell faculty to give easier exams to increase enrollments. State universities need to provide a rationale for tax dollars; private schools pay the bills with tuition payments. On campus, departments fight with each other to attract students. And since it is important to enroll a large number of students in the classes, we take notice that many students (customers) appear to like easy tests and classes that can be passed without taking lecture notes.

For faculty, it is easier to teach from the text and use the publisher-provided materials. For students, the resulting classes are easier and (maybe) more enjoyable. It is *easier* for everyone, but no one benefits when students learn less.

A recent graduate was visiting town not long ago and as we talked she described the types of courses from her prior years, noting those from which she learned the most and those that just took up time. As I told her some of the items mentioned above, she asked, "Can't we force faculty to not use the stuff from textbook publishers?" She was asking why we can't force faculty to not be slackers, though she admitted that faculty slackers were popular with students.

A University should focus on thinking, but our textbooks are filled with lists for students to memorize. In reality, a successful career requires a facile and educated mind, not specific information that any business textbook might contain. The classroom experience should have more value than just the credit on the transcript. Faculty fail to strongly and repeatedly tell students that the abilities to think and write clearly are more important than the textbook's checklists.

Unfortunately, the pressures are in the other direction, as too many faculty and administrators see students as customers who "buy" our courses and degrees. The textbook publishers are merely serving the needs of large segments of their customers. But somehow, I think that the end losers are the students in our watered-down classes.

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Herbert Jack Rotfeld is a Professor of Marketing at Auburn University. He also the editor or the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*.

The Irascible Professor comments: Professor Rotfeld makes some excellent points. In recent years students have adopted a "tell me what I need to know to get an A" attitude, and too many instructors have obliged them. The result is education that has become little more than rote memorization in many disciplines. No longer does a faculty member have to ask questions that require thoughtful answers, and no longer do students have to develop anything more than superficial understanding in their classes. My colleagues often referred to this as "student-centered learning". Somehow, the IP remained old-fashioned enough to demand knowledge-based learning. Professor Rotfeld is one of a dying breed of instructors who holds to the same standard.