

The Bankruptcy of the Liberal Arts System

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First Abomination: The GPA

The Role of the GPA

We live in a culture that loves to place information in quantitative terms. It loves to sum up a complicated situation by assigning it a numerical value. Since even the quality of an athlete is often expressed simplistically as a numerical figure, it's no surprise that we try to do the same with student performance. However, the irony of this love for numerical measures is that our society is also scientifically illiterate. All too often, those who display the greatest enthusiasm for numerical and even graphical representation of complex phenomena lack the most basic training in critical thinking and in the analysis of the significance of the figures to which they are paying homage.

Since I have no interest in ball games, I am not concerned with the validity or lack thereof of batting averages and other numerical measures that are applied to athletes. However, I am deeply concerned with the use of meaningless numerical measurement of student standing; and the GPA is indeed meaningless. It makes absolutely no sense to average the grades that a pupil or student has received in a wide variety of courses. The most that can be said for the GPA is that it shows the willingness of a high school pupil or university student to enroll for courses at or below his or her "station in life" and to work effectively within that course structure. The GPA rewards those pupils or students who choose courses of study that are less demanding and punishes those who choose courses that will challenge them to perform at the limits of their ability.

It is my considered view that the act, on the part of an instructor or an academic institution, of calculating a GPA is an act of professional malpractice. Furthermore, the act of using the GPA to assess student standing, to judge a student's qualification to enter an academic institution or to judge a student's merit for the possible awarding of scholarship money is an act of disgraceful and unprofessional conduct.

What Use Should Be Made of the GPA?

The GPA should play no role in any assessment of student standing. Instead, a careful analysis should be made of a student's record; an analysis that takes careful note of what courses were taken and how many, when they were

taken, what grades were received and how these grades have varied over time. A meaningful analysis of a student's record should focus on the student's achievements rather than the student's failures.

Thus, the value of a student's performance should be assessed on the basis of the courses that the student has completed. Under no circumstances should a student be penalized for experimenting, for trying his or her hand at courses that may turn out to be beyond the level at which the student is presently ready to study.

At present, we inflict punishment upon a student who finds himself or herself in a course for which he or she is not prepared. If that student does not drop the course by a particular published deadline then we make his or her failure to perform in that course follow him or her like a criminal record. We reward those who drop and punish those who stay in and try to succeed.

I find it incredible that there are university professors who support this sort of punitive approach with the assertion that students have to be taught to be responsible. I challenge such professors to include a list of rejecta in their own resumes.

In fact, a student who has failed a course and a student who has dropped the course and a student who has never enrolled for the course all have the same status: They do not know the material of the course. Their transcripts should therefore say precisely the same thing. In other words, the course should not be mentioned there.

The Assignment of Grades

There are many fine institutions of higher learning all over the world that recognize only three possible grade outcomes for a student in a course. These are sometimes called A, B and C and sometimes called I, II and III but their meaning is the same:

1. The grade of A indicates unusual and commendable understanding, appreciation and knowledge of the course material. This grade indicates an individual who stands out from the crowd.
2. The grade of B indicates fully acceptable and comfortable understanding, appreciation and knowledge of the course material. This grade expresses a strong vote of confidence in the student's competence to enter the next level of study.
3. The grade of C indicates sufficient understanding, appreciation and

knowledge to justify promotion to the next level of study.

A student who fails to obtain the grade of C in a course has the status of not having completed the course. That student is free to try the course again or, with the help of a competent advisor, may decide upon an alternative and more successful course of action.

We have no need for the grades D and F. They tell us nothing. Their purpose is purely punitive; punishment for not dropping the course in time. Our message is: If you think you may fail then drop before it's too late. Don't try to succeed because, if you don't manage, we'll punish you and lecture you on the need to be "responsible for your decisions". Freed from the yoke of the GPA, high schools, colleges and universities would be free to drop the meaningless grades of D and F.

The GPA and Mathematics

Of all courses that high school pupils and university students must take, mathematics stands alone in the fear that it inspires. Quite simply, mathematics is hard. It's no use standing before the students and telling them that mathematics is easy and that learning is fun. They are quite smart enough to know when we are lying.

Given the punitive atmosphere that prevails in most high schools, colleges and universities today, it's no surprise that students come to university all too often with the minimum mathematics background that the system requires and that, all too often, they must enter college and university level mathematics course after having taken little or know mathematics in the twelfth grade.

Certainly, a student entering the twelfth grade, who is worried about his or her performance in mathematics, has no incentive today to take a mathematics course. To do so is to invite a lower GPA, to lose possible scholarship money and to lose the chance to enter the university of his or her choice. Thus, the very people who most need to study mathematics intensively in the twelfth grade are the people who are most likely to take none at all.

Then we cry when students enter university courses unqualified to study the material that they contain. The present system causes enormous harm to the cause of mathematics education in the following ways;

1. High school pupils are discouraged from enrolling in more than the minimum number of mathematics courses and are discouraged from enrolling in more demanding courses when less demanding courses are

available.

This aspect of the damage is aggravated by the fact that the United States, incredibly, fails to have a common nation-wide university entrance examination system that will determine whether or not pupils leaving the high schools have reached the minimal level of understanding and knowledge required to become university students.

2. College and university students are discouraged from taking more than the minimum amount of mathematics that their program of studies requires. When honours sections of such courses are available, students have little incentive to enter them. When they run into difficulty in a mathematics course, they have little incentive to try to overcome the difficulty. Instead, they are encouraged to drop.

Second Abomination: The Core Curriculum

The Role of the Core Curriculum

A university should not be in the business of forcing material down the throats of its students. There is no need to browbeat students into taking courses; and it doesn't work. I am tired of hearing complacent and self serving statements about how a core requirement builds aware and broadly educated citizens.

The little tables that spring up all over the campus at the end of each term belie all of those grandiose claims. Students stand in line at the little tables selling their books. The message is clear: *"I've done my duty, I've paid my dues, I've served my sentence, I've learned all of this crap and I've satisfied your requirements. Now let me get rid of this hateful book so that I should never have to think about this stuff again."* Oddly enough, the universities don't seem to be bothered by the existence of those book buying tables. They give the appearance of sponsoring them. The students have no idea that giving up the book at the end of a course may be a perversion of the entire educational process.

Whatever happened to the fundamental principle that a course is the **opening** of the door to knowledge rather than the completion of the process of learning?

An Alternative to the Core Curriculum

A university should provide its students with opportunities for broadening experiences. Instead of compulsory physical education, there should be facilities for physical activity and encouragement for their use. Instead of compulsory courses in the appreciation of music there should be campus music groups, run by students. Instead of university courses in English writing there should be an understanding that reading and writing are skills to be acquired in primary and secondary education. It should not be the business of the universities to teach anyone how to read or write.

In the absence of a punitive grading system and the calculation of the meaningless GPA, it should be easy to encourage students of, say, electrical

engineering to take courses in sociology or appreciation of music, even with the knowledge that they are unlikely to obtain high grades in courses so far removed from their own field of study. Students who enroll in courses on a voluntary basis driven by a desire to learn will gain astronomically more from the courses than those who enter in order to satisfy core requirements. And those who would not enter voluntarily will gain only resentment from the courses they are compelled to attend. They will be first in line at the tables when the course ends.