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## Educators, Bell Curves, and Rousseau

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## **Educators, Bell Curves, and Rousseau**

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the differences between two universities (neither named) that value and reward very different teaching strategies and philosophies. Whereas one has esteem for “tough” professors with high drop and fail rates, seeing them as educators with high standards and principles, the second aligns itself more closely with today’s best practices in the academy, and seeks educators who nurture the talents, abilities, and unique qualities of individual students.

At my former institution in Nowhere, Deep South, gospel is that “tough” professors, those with “standards,” teach classes impossible to pass. Professors have bragging contests, reporting with satisfaction how high their drop rates are and how unintelligent their students. Good student evaluations are thought to reflect lax standards, and popular instructors are suspected of buying approval through a combination of low expectations and unearned high grades. If a student writes a positive comment on the back of a professor’s evaluation form, it is assumed the professor has in some way been unprofessional.

“Tough” professors hold their charges in what I can only term contempt, despising those whose futures lie in their hands and who also, incidentally, afford them their livelihood. Countless times I overheard colleagues congratulating themselves on having shamed a freshman -- at that school most often from a minority or underprivileged background -- for not grasping the principles of Plato’s Republic or the deeper implications of Ahab’s whale.

Grades are obsessively scrutinized to determine who is – and, more importantly, who is not – conforming to the bell curve. Faculty with high drop and fail rates sit on the best committees, getting the highest merit pay and earning endowed professorships. In this anxious atmosphere, non-tenured faculty give late-semester pop quizzes to lower averages before final grades are submitted, and grow apprehensive if their courses fill up rapidly or if their comments on RateMyProfessors.com are complimentary. “Tough” professors, those known to delight in failing students, pontificated to nearly-empty classrooms. Even in those courses, held open by administration for four or five individuals, the curve is venerated. So it is that semester after semester, legions of students, many working one or several jobs in addition to attending school, waste Pell grants and student loans, learning too late they had from day one been among those targeted to fail in order to maintain a curve.

I was astounded by this attitude, especially considering the current emphasis on programs promoting first year excellence and the academy's growing interest in projects that recruit, retain, and nourish individual students. How, I asked myself, can anyone dedicated to education in today's academy deliberately doom a certain percentage of those under their tutelage to failure simply to conform to a curve? Doesn't every class have its own dynamic, and haven't we now embraced the fact that students who are hesitant beginners often pick up speed and determination as semesters progress? Isn't it the educator's role to encourage shy or shaky students while challenging those who are bright and bold?

I want to make one thing clear: I do not advocate lowering standards for, or expecting less of, those who are incapable or lazy. However, I do believe expectations should be such that the average hard-working student can reasonably hope to achieve the goals and objectives of any given class at his level of study. Furthermore, there are differences among institutions. Nowhere, Deep South doesn't attract the same caliber of student as those who attend the Ivy League schools, for example, or the bigger and more prestigious state universities. No matter. Schools have a duty to educate the students they attract and enroll, and even educators who see themselves as better than the university that hired them cannot snobbishly dismiss the youngsters entrusted to their tutelage. Educators have a duty to educate the students who end up in their classrooms, and this means meeting them where they are as learners, and bringing them up from there. Expecting a rural southern freshman, often the first in his family to graduate from high school, to instantly seize upon the unstated in *Moby-Dick* is not only ludicrous but deeply cruel.

Everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed in college, whether he can afford a tier one institution, or must content himself with a small, rural college. If some students can't make the grade because of disability, laziness, or unwillingness to do the work, so be it. Many people discover they're not cut out for higher education, and that's simply life. What I object to is programming the failure of a pre-determined portion of the student population, wasting huge sums of tax payers' money, and placing bell curves above human material and the duty of teaching.

Rousseau's *Emile* expresses sensible and sensitive recommendations regarding education, recommendations that fit beautifully with the current atmosphere in America's academy. Everyone, Rousseau says, is entitled to the possibility of an education, one that should, as much as possible, be geared to the individual learner's needs and talents. Every mind has its personal mode of expression, and an educator's mission must be to maintain an environment that maximizes individual learning styles. In today's colleges and universities this means that, while adhering to course descriptions, syllabi, and learning outcomes, we must also nurture different personalities, recognizing that every student reaches full potential only in a positive, reinforcing environment. When Rousseau recommends that a child remain in ignorance of ideas beyond his grasp, he means learners should learn at their level, according to expectations reasonable for their particular situation. Freshmen should therefore be held to freshman expectations, and

nobody should ever be designated as the percentile to fail merely to maintain a curve that makes a professor look “tough.”

Knowing that statistically most professors are offered only one tenure-track position in their career, I now am extremely fortunate to have another chance at educational nirvana at a very different university from Nowhere, Deep South. I currently teach at an institution that recognizes individual learning patterns, and honors those educators who recognize and respect them. Colleagues encourage students, and work with them individually. While the bell curve is acknowledged, we realize that under all those graphs are living individuals with hopes, dreams, and aspirations. We know students flourish in a positive atmosphere, and expect each class to develop its own personality. Students are valued, and shaming someone who’s not yet a sophisticated savant is the most unforgivable of offenses. It’s held that students come to us to learn and grow -- not to be disrespected, hurt, or discarded. Positive evaluations are seen as recognition of decent teaching – we know that teachers who genuinely teach are often genuinely loved.

Again, I do not advocate passing students who don’t measure up. The only professors more dangerous than those who flunk students without justification are those who pass them without justification. I simply want education to be reasonable and educators to retain humility and a sense of perspective. Courses should have reasonable content, goals, objectives, and outcomes. “Reasonable” means suited to the school, the situation, the level, and the student population. Professors should be reasonable in their demands, and reasonable in their assessments. Failure should be based on a student’s inability or unwillingness to do reasonable work under reasonable circumstances, not on an outdated veneration of a meaningless curve. We must admit that students are generally neither fools nor idiots, and that they generally give teachers the evaluations they deserve. The bottom line is that in today’s academy, being a “tough” professor with high drop and fail rates is neither a quality to admire nor a goal to strive for. Instead, educators must dedicate themselves to nourishing -- not starving -- the unique potential of every single student in their charge.