

**NOTES FROM THE DISMAL SCIENCE***"...And, where all the college teachers are above average"*

Sherman T. Folland

Radio humorist, Garrison Keillor, begins each episode of his "News from Lake Woebegone, the town that time forgot," with this line: "Lake Woebegone, Minnesota, where all the women are strong, and the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." My curiosity is to wonder if Mr. Keillor would say that all the college teachers in Lake Woebegone are above average. Is that possible?

The idea was placed on me not long ago when a friend asked over lunch what I remembered from my own college teachers of years ago and which of them did I think were 'below average.' None came immediately to mind, except maybe Prof. P. He taught English with too sharp a wit. I have students who will come in late, but no one came in late for P, or if they did, they regretted it. You wrote several term papers per course and he graded them acerbically: "Learn to integrate your quotations with your text, this looks as though you were pasting in S&H Green Stamps (those were something like today's drug store coupons). I wasn't sure if P was 'below average', but I knew I hated him. Roughly each decade after graduation I would happen to think back on my college teachers and remember P with disdain. Then sometime after twenty years had passed, when I jogged my memory again, I asked myself a different question: For which teachers did I still remember what was said in class? Guess what: P. Almost every theme he discussed.

But, he still wasn't the best teacher, just one of the more effective ones. My best teachers were D and G. In memory, I find that the reasons I picked these teachers to be best are illuminating to me. Each taught a small seminar style class. Each drew the students from around the small, 2000-student college who I had heard were among the best. Consider G's class. About a dozen students, reading several books as background on the subject: *The Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. (Would any of my students today consensually choose a course with a title like that?). Prof. G said little the entire semester. "John, please explain your interpretation of the fascist philosophy?" John had read his assigned reading thoroughly, but something in his answer was amiss. Instead of correcting John, Prof. G just turned to Betty and said "Betty, do you take the same reading of this issue." Betty didn't, and she offered a more informed view. Prof. G didn't confirm this, he just suggested a line of thought to proceed from that point; but, somehow we knew that Betty's version was an improvement. This class was a genuine pleasure.

Was Prof. G truly an excellent teacher? I can't really say for sure. Would G have excelled in my view if it hadn't been for Betty, John and all of us who never missed reading an assigned page and always had ideas of our own? What if 60 students had decided that "*The Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*" sounded like a really intriguing course. What instead if the 60 had been *required*

to take the course? The only conclusion I am sure of is that a good course is a blend of voices, professor and students, and the right situation.

Overall, I think that we are too impatient to quantify things. There is a saying in economics that a common fallacy is that we spend hours and hours developing the most precise measurement of the wrong concept. There is also another relevant saying in economics that goes like this: "When the true concept is hard to quantify, management will tend to latch onto an alternative that is easy to quantify." The true concept here is probably "teaching effectiveness" as might be revealed in the gains in performance that students show. This could be very expensive to evaluate and where it has been applied it has been subject to bitter, controversial claims and counterclaims. But, it is the real point of teaching. Student quantitative ratings of professors are relatively cheap, yet they are subject to numerous flaws. For example, a class of 60 in a required freshman course will be equated with a seminar of 12 students in an elective who sought the course out. There are many more, all well known to the experts.

So, should we drop the student evaluations of teaching (SETs)? Prof. Doane in this journal issue makes a very good case that we should not do that. I certainly agree with him. For all their flaws, they do give an open channel of communication for students to reach the administration. Prof. Lilliston also makes a very strong case, that it is best to use multiple means to evaluate teaching

performance. Even though the quantities on the typical SET form aren't truly valid, they probably provide a reasonably true view of whether students like or dislike this teacher. An important piece of information. Yet, the research statistics provide a stern view. If student performance by the end of the course is poorly correlated with the teacher's SET scores, as the statistics show, then some bad teachers are being rated "good" and some good teachers are being rated "bad."

Besides problems of validity, there is a bigger downside to using SETs alone. If SETs measure mainly how much students like or dislike a teacher, and if they are the only measure of teaching effectiveness that is being used, then they will potentially cover over a great deal of Type II Error: the error of accepting a false hypothesis. The research, at least in economics, shows that the top teacher characteristics that yield high SET scores are personal characteristics such as personal confidence and a genial disposition. These personal characteristics are not genuine teacher inputs into the course. Staying abreast of one's field, willingness to grade papers and essays, or saying "no" to students when no is the right answer, these things get set aside. It's not the faculty who loses in this situation; big deal if one gets a slightly lower raise (if you even have a merit pool at all!). The people who lose are the students, who never know the difference.

I personally favor the "portfolio" process of evaluation, that is, a process which evaluates teachers in several different ways and not just one way, e.g. SETs,

classroom visits, reviews of tests and syllabi, interviews with sampled students and so on. Many people prefer the portfolio approach, but then, many don't. As an economist, I realize that my colleagues in economics may also differ. Is there really any "economic" way of doing evaluation? Probably not.

However, I dug through the annals of economic arcana and found a recommendation by Adam Smith, who split students into two groups: the sons of the rich and the sons of the working man. For the students with wealthy parents, Smith recommended that they pay their professors directly; this would provide a wonderful stimulus to the professors, who were often lazy and out of date within their disciplines, according to Smith. Wow! Talk about student evaluations of teachers! Students would vote with their dollars and teachers would earn a living only to the degree that they could please their students.

So, what about the 'sons of the working man?' For these Smith favored public education, much along the lines of ours today. The twist is that living standards in money terms have advanced so tremendously since the Scotland of the 1700s that our working men of today would have been the economic aristocracy of Smith's time. But, in any case, we can see that the contentious issue of how to evaluate teaching effectiveness has been with academe for quite some time.