

soundoff continued

Prof questions Senate questionnaire

Continued from p.11

students who seldom seek their professors outside the classroom. I am afraid that their judgement about a professor's accessibility will be either based on hearsay, or, to be on the safe side, they will give him a passing grade. It would be more appropriate to ask how often had a student tried to contact his professor and if he had any difficulty in getting help. I wish the medical profession were as concerned about the welfare of the patients who often have to wait up to two hours even after an appointment has been made.

(3) ATTENDANCE AT CLASSES: If the attendance of a faculty member at his classes can be termed "unreliable", then it is a serious charge against him. Such members should be few and far between, and it should hardly be necessary to ask each student of every course in all the departments throughout the university and every term of the year, to identify them. Is it not the responsibility of the chairman of each department to make sure that under normal circumstances all lectures are held at the appointed time?

(4) USE OF CLASS TIME: As for a faculty member's use of class time, for most courses it is used for lecturing. Therefore, if the faculty member is well informed about the subject (Question 1), is well prepared for the lecture (Question 2) and his presentation is good (Question 3), then his use of class time must have been "effective". In other words, this question is redundant in the light of other questions.

(5) STIMULATION OF INTEREST: The question whether a faculty member stimulated a student's interest in the subject, is rather misleading. The students' interest in a particular subject is much more dependent upon other factors than on professor's stimulation. And if we assume that most students do not attend universities for intellectual stimulation, and most courses are designed to achieve limited facility in a specific subject, then intellectual stimulation for a particular subject might even be detrimental to the students' goals. As an example, if a student was truly stimulated about a problem in mathematics, he could spend all his time investigating it, and almost certainly neglect all his other subjects. As a

matter of fact, he might even fail the course he is taking in mathematics.

Most of our mathematics courses are so called service courses, and sometime different topics are squeezed into a course merely to enable the student to acquire the necessary skill for use in another discipline. It is not the primary purpose of the courses to stimulate interest in the subject matter. The stimulation for

(6) PRESENTATION OF THE SUBJECT MATTER: How can a faculty member's presentation of a course be "adequate" to a student if it is not "clear" to him? The distinction between "unclear" and "confusing" is rather subtle, because unclear can be confusing and confusing can be unclear.

(7) PREPARATION FOR CLASSES: How are students supposed to discern whether a professor's preparation was only "good" but not "excellent" or "adequate" but not "good"? Why isn't adequate preparation adequate? What is meant by "excellent" preparation? If a faculty member makes an occasional error, does it mean he is not fully prepared? An occasional slip in doing a mathematical problem cannot be avoided unless one does every problem just before going for a lecture or copies everything from notes. Does it imply lack of preparation? Does "excellent" preparation mean flawless presentation under all circumstances? If so, is it really appropriate to present such an unreal picture of a professor?

(8) FACULTY MEMBER'S KNOWLEDGE: On the subject of a faculty member's knowledge of the subject, I do not think that a student can meaningfully assess whether the member's knowledge is "exceptional" or only "good", or "adequate." It is an unfair demand from a person whose own knowledge of the subject is supposedly either non-existent or very inadequate. The response will obviously be based on superficialities or the theatrics of presentation rather than on any accurate measurement of the depth of knowledge.

Is it really the job of an average student to decide whether the knowledge of his professor is "adequate", "not too good" or "poor"? Unless we assume that most faculty members are imposters, and also poor at that, it will be a rare exception rather than the rule that a professor's knowledge of the subject he is studying, even for good students, does not come, as a rule, from the professor, rather from the student's desire to get ahead in his own field of interest or from the fear of failing in the achievement of the objective that brought him to the university

in the first place, which might be far from intellectual stimulation. The kind of mathematics that would stimulate students' interest in mathematics and the kind of mathematical skills they need to acquire to do something else, are not always the same. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the students have to learn many a subject as a necessary evil, regardless of their interest in it. teaching will be poor in the eyes of a person who himself knows very little about it.

GENERAL COMMENTS: (i) It is possible that some of my remarks do not apply equally to subjects other than between stimulating interest in a political, social or historical event, and in stimulating or maintaining interest in an abstruse mathematical theorem or in a long sequence of steps of any problem which requires some background work and demands undivided attention. But obviously a university wide questionnaire should be applicable to all. I also assume that this questionnaire is to be answered mostly by undergraduate students.

(ii) As far as students are concerned they should feel confident that their professors have the necessary knowledge in their field and are willing and able to teach and guide them. They should not have to wonder each term whether their professor would be competent enough to teach. Only rarely should they have to criticize and revolt against their teachers. Of course, they should be free to voice their complaints, real and imagined, against the university: its professors or the administrators.

(iii) It is not obvious what purpose this questionnaire is supposed to serve. According to the accompanying note, it is "to provide comparable data for use in assessment procedures". It seems to me that the word "procedures" has been incorrectly used here. As a noun it means the manners or methods of doing something. The correct expression might have been "assessment process". It is surprising that it escaped the attention of all the Committee members and others associated with it.

(iv) If the questionnaire is to be used for grading professors for promotion and financial rewards, or for retributions, then those faculty members who have already received the highest honor that the university can bestow upon them, namely full professorship, need not be assessed any more. Otherwise, by implication, it would appear that we might have among us faculty members whose knowledge may be poor, who may be poorly prepared for classes, whose lectures may be confusing, who might make students

lose interest in the subject; attending of whose lectures might be a waste of students' time, whose own attendance at lectures might be unreliable; who might be impossible to reach; who may not be able to explain the course requirements clearly, and yet they are full professors! The same would apply to those persons who have been honored as distinguished teachers.

(v) On the other hand, if the purpose of the questionnaire is to frighten faculty members into becoming good teachers, then it is very probable that the poor teachers will try to make sure that the majority of their students vouch for them that they are good, without any appreciable change in the quality of their teaching.

(vi) It is my personal opinion that 90 to 95 per cent of the faculty members are "good teachers", that is they perform their teaching obligations conscientiously and as well as can be reasonably expected of them. Only a very small number might be considered "exceptionally good" because of their unusual physical or mental endowments. No teacher is perfect for all students. Some very good teachers will be considered poor by poor students. A very small number (0 to 5 per cent) might indeed be poor teachers, but they might also have some other redeeming features. It would be difficult to condemn them, and equally difficult to teach them to become good teachers.

(vii) Teaching is an interaction of two parties: the teacher and the learner. It is not possible to maximize the qualities of teaching without any reference to the qualities of the learner. It is not the professor's fault that a university should open its door, for financial reasons, to those who are obviously unfit for university education and those who need all kinds of remedial help in the skills of the ordinary language and basic mathematics. The very presentation of an option to young first year students to call their professors ill qualified and confusing, is an invitation to poor students to transfer their shortcomings as students to their professors.

(viii) In my view, every university is liable to have a few poor teachers whose creative abilities overpower their capacity to teach. It is also not necessary to make everyone conform to any standard pattern without enough allowance for individual idiosyncracies. Teaching at the university level should not become spoon feeding. The

students should gradually learn to be self reliant and demand only the general guidance from their professors.

(ix) Such questionnaires can at best isolate the very best or the very poor of teachers. Majority of the professors will be indistinguishable, and no comparison will be possible. Perhaps it is a vain pursuit to try to find a neat statistical means to grade all faculty members in different subjects with the help of students. Such questionnaires shift the responsibility of quality control of teaching from the administrators to the students, giving a false sense of pride and satisfaction to the students and a handy verdict to the administrators, of a jury that remains for ever anonymous and is never checked for its competence or the quality of its judgements.

(x) If the university is seriously interested in improving the quality of teaching, there are certainly better ways. Here are a few suggestions.

(a) It should be recognized that a person who has been a poor teacher for 5, 10 or 20 years, is difficult to reform. But a person who is just entering the profession, can be and should be induced, persuaded and, if necessary, pressured to become a good teacher. This does not preclude the possibility of excellent young teachers.

(b) Rewards for good teaching must be made explicit and more tangible than an honorary degree.

(c) Academic ranks should be given solely on the basis of teaching and/or research.

(d) All committees without any serious academic purpose should be abolished, saving the academics thousands of hours of valuable time.

(e) Academic administrators should be allowed and expected to make individual judgements and held responsible for their actions. They should be credited or discredited according to the good or poor managements of the unit for which they are responsible.

(xi) I would appreciate a collective and/or individual response to my questions, criticism and suggestions from all of you who have unanimously approved the questionnaire.

I hope that you will not treat your decision as an irreversible process of nature.

Sincerely yours,

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