

Bruns course evaluation feature stimulates prof

Dear Editor:

I am a member of the Department of Mathematics at UNB. A colleague of mine handed me some pages of the Brunswickan yesterday, dated February 21, 1975, containing some remarks by the President of UNB on course evaluation and a reprint of an article from Loyola News with the heading: "Course Evaluation: Do Students have the Right?"

Although the title of the article was misleading, because it did not deal with the question of "right" at all, it did have some other interesting comments which deserve repeating.

"The most common criticism expressed by students fall into one of the two categories: first, that the education offered does not measure up to its advertised aims; and secondly, that the advertised aims themselves must be modified."

The article lists some common student complaints, which can be summarized as follows: (1) Lack of coordination among different sections of the same course. (2) Professor speaks too softly. (3) Professor is not prepared. (4) Wrong prerequisites for courses. (5) Marking is too easy or too hard. (6) Professor is incompetent (relatively rare complaint). The article then points out that an attempt on the part of the students to correct these through course evaluation will not meet with success, because of some of the inadequacies of such evaluations. "Students enter courses with widely differing aims, talents and standards, so that the appearance of 'objectivity' presented by statistical course evaluations is a misleading one."

"Paradoxically, sometimes the professors who have succeeded in mechanizing their courses to the greatest extent are evaluated most highly. This occurs when it is the aim of both student and teacher to have the course proceed above all as painlessly as possible."

"Thus the evaluation of a professor's attitude depends on the student's reasons for being at university. For the student who is solely interested in getting good marks on tests, a course may seem well organized; while a student who has broader interests will find it dull."

The article suggests that "lobbying" will not be a good way either to improve the quality of education, and recommends that students should get on decision making bodies like tenure committees.

"If students gain representation on these committees, their concern about teaching quality cannot be ignored, as they can be under the present system, and they can be under even the most sophisticated lobbying system."

"Students have no interests more immediate than those relating to the quality of their education. Student represen-

tation on tenure committees will ensure that these interests are adequately defended."

It appears to me that there is an over-emphasis on legal rights and political solutions of simple problems of life. Most of the problems faced by students are relatively simple, and call for simple solutions. A student in many cases can resolve them individually. For example:

Simple Solutions of Students' Problems

(1) If a student finds that a course is not well coordinated, he should inform the chairman of the department. Lack of coordination is usually not a shortcoming of an individual professor. (2) If a student cannot hear a professor, he should raise his hand and say: "Sir I cannot hear you". (3) If a professor is occasionally unprepared, a student should ignore it, but if he is habitually unprepared, he should first make complaint to the chairman of the department concerned, and in extreme cases, the students should organize and boycott the class completely. (4) If there are wrong prerequisites, a student should inform the department as soon as possible. It would usually be an oversight rather than a designed torture plan, and the changes will be made. (5) Marking of papers is a very subjective act in certain fields, and we must accept as a rule, the honesty and the integrity of the professor.

Student Teacher Relationship

A student's opinion of a teacher or his attitude towards him is an important factor in the process of teaching and learning. For this reason it would be desirable if a student had an opportunity to enrol in a course for whose professor he had respect and admiration. However, at the university level, the dependence of a student on a teacher should gradually reduce, until he needs only guidance, rather than coaching and spoon feeding. Hence, it is really in the interest of the student to have some professors who are less helpful and more demanding than others.

There is nothing particularly wrong about a student being swayed by the opinion of his or her friend and pre-judge a professor, like or dislike him, and therefore, wish to be in his course or not to be in his course.

If after his own experience he discovers that he disagrees with his friend, he would perhaps prefer his own judgment. On the other hand, if such opinions were presented in the garb of objective statistical inferences, it will have more of an impact on him, because it is difficult to defy a judgement whose judge is an impersonal entity like a jury which somehow seems more objective than it really is.

III Effects of Statistical Course Evaluation

The effect on a sensitive teacher can be very demoralizing, if for no fault of his, in two or three consecutive years he is judged to be inadequate by his students. The overall effect of formalizing "rumours" might have the opposite effect on teaching; instead of frightening poor teachers into becoming good

teachers, it might induce them to become "cheaters" if their basic securities are threatened. I believe that the publication of student opinion survey or evaluation of courses will have almost no effect on improving the quality of education at universities.

Student Input Towards Conducting of a Course

There is only one way in which the student reaction to a course or a teacher can be put to good use: I suggest that a questionnaire be circulated among the students within 2-4 weeks of exposure to a course and a teacher, to list their grievances, if any, and suggestions to improve the presentation of the course, as far as they are concerned. This information should be passed on to the professor.

Students on Tenure Committees

It is unlikely that even if the students were in majority on tenure committees, they will cure the shortcomings of professors by not granting tenure to a few. What about the large number of tenured members of the university professors? I am afraid that the statistical reaction of students towards tenured and untenured members will tend to be identical.

Students' Attitude Towards Learning

The point which apparently escapes discussion concerning the quality of education, is the attitude of students themselves towards education and learning. However remote it might seem to some, even students can have shortcomings! A "perfect" university with "perfect" professors, would not produce "perfect" students, unless students were receptive and eager, willing and able to learn. It is my personal feeling that as high as 50 percent of the students entering a university should be channelled to some trade school, where their concept of education as a commodity will be closer to being a reality. I also feel that certain disciplines now taught in the universities properly belong to trade schools, and should never be a part of a university. Or else the universities should grade their faculties and departments, and treat their students and staff differently.

A student should not forget that the politicians among students are

by nature a different kind of breed. They need some cause to fight for. They need to have a platform for elections in which they can promise to do something, as their counterparts do in society. Their motives are not always simple well being of their constituents. A university is a poor ground to practice politics. The politicians cannot find fault with their constituents, because that means votes. So they have only the professors and the "administration" to take on. The administration consists of some bureaucrats who themselves are part politicians. So they are willing to play the game. Among the professors, the majority is too busy and involved in their own thing to take serious note, and by nature unequipped to fight political battles. However, the trend is changing, as more and more politicized students of the sixties, become part of the faculty today.

Power Politics is not For Universities

If the students insist on using the opinion surveys to gain political power, and access to tenure committees to control professors, and the administration uses their statistical survey as the only guide to evaluate a professor's teaching, it will give impetus to the feeling on the part of the faculty that they need to band together in some kind of union, as they are being led to believe on economic grounds. Here are some indications. The librarians at a university are as important as a library in the life of

a student and a professor. But to suggest that the faculty and the librarians have more in common than other administrative personnel at a university, would be a travesty of truth. And yet the librarians have now become members of the faculty associations, for the obvious reason that there is strength in numbers. This attitude in my opinion is a negation of the very purpose of education and intellectual pursuits. But the instinct for survival seems to override all other considerations even the professors will stoop as low as necessary. If the students follow the same pattern, they are liable to achieve less "quality" in their education than they would like to have.

Derelict Professor and Unfit Students

I suggest that for every professor who might be derelict in his duties there are probably 100 students who squander money and time, their own and provided by others, in the name of university education; which either they do not desire or do not deserve. Would it not be more appropriate if the students politicians helped spot students early enough and either help them to become ideal students as they themselves hopefully are, or get them removed from the university to reduce the pressure on university resources.

University & Money

This brings me to the subject of money and a university. I presume

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