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My Turn

Meeting the Bottom

Line in the College Biz

What happens when capitalism and education collide? Teachers become clerks selling degrees.

By Lynne Drury Lerych

I AM A COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHER. No, let me be more specific: I'm the English teacher from hell, the one whose classes students approach in wide-eyed panic because they're too hard. How hard are they? Well, in my required freshman and sophomore composition classes, students are sometimes required to write as much as one short essay per week, to turn in those essays on deadline and to demonstrate evidence of careful, original thought. I even ask them to revise their writing, as if there were any value to reconsidering the thoughts one puts on paper.

As a result of my draconian bent, my students are expected to devote about 10 to 15 hours per week to attending class and completing their tasks. Assuming my students were saddled with an equal workload in the other two courses that round out their full-time class schedule—which they assure me they are not, because no other teacher is so hard!—their time commitment per week would be 30 to 45-hours.

What this means is that I have stacks of papers to read on a regular basis. All that critiquing, on top of planning, grading, committee meetings—and, oh yes, teaching—makes for about a 60-hour workweek (on a teacher's salary, of course), which I willingly endure. In spite of the uncomprehending looks I occasionally get, I am at peace with the time-and-money aspects of my job.

My reality may not have been a big deal three or four decades ago. Back then, I might have shrugged while those outside my profession tsked in amazement at the
selflessness of teachers. But now, in the first few nanoseconds of the new millennium, working hard is suspect if the rewards aren’t immediate and obvious. Academic standards are in disrepute. A professor who sets the bar high is seen as an obstacle by students looking for a quick route to a degree, and an inconvenience by administrators with an eye toward the bottom line.

You see, those of us who work in the higher-education biz are “competing for FTEs,” An FTE (or full-time equivalent) is what we used to call a student. An FTE is both a customer and a product, and the inevitable “paradigm shifts” spawned of that particular contradiction are enough to make one swear off college politics forever.

Ultimately, what my colleagues and I are experiencing is the clash between academic standards and capitalism. “Competition” is the watchword—OK for manufacturers of electronics, but potentially dangerous in education. We’ve reached a point at which competition for students (sorry, FTEs) exists not only among institutions, but also among teachers. The formula goes like this: the more FTEs I have enrolled in my class, the higher my value is to the institution. And how do I get more FTEs to enroll? Well, I start by not being so hard.

In today’s anti-tenure climate, in which unprotected teachers can be terminated with little or no justification, the incentive for new, part-time and other untenured faculty members to dumb down the curriculum is compelling. For a teacher without job security, the price of high standards can be a never-ending job search.

It’s a stacked deck. The pressure to make higher education “easier” comes from colleagues, students, our instant-gratification culture and the increasingly popular Business Model, faithfully and devastatingly followed by administrators and trustees.

What does the current state of edu-preneurship have to do with whether I’m willingly overworked and underpaid? Unlike my untenured colleagues, who often must consider sacrificing their standards in order to feed their
families, I have tenure. Tenured faculty cannot be fired without amply demonstrated just cause—and, so far at least, upholding academic standards has not been deemed just cause for terminating faculty. With tenure comes academic freedom.

And what am I free to do? I am free to work twice as many hours as I am paid to work, even though that effort is resented in some circles and barely tolerated in others. The greatest irony of my professional life may be that if I were to cut back my workload and diminish the knowledge and skill I help my students to gain, my standing with the bosses might actually improve.

So why don’t I do it? Why not just bag the standards? Perhaps because I’d risk resenting my job, instead of getting a kick out of it. Or because I’d lose the right to passionately defend a solid liberal-arts education against naysayers. Finally, though, I think I’d really miss those few e-mails I receive every year from former students writing to tell me what they’ve accomplished with the skills they honed in my class.

For a sticky philosophical quandary, the questions are pretty simple: am I a clerk charged with selling college degrees or am I involved in a more meaningful experience? Part of me says that no argument is more worthy of my attention. But another part of me—the part that’s eying the stack of essays sitting on my desk awaiting critique—says I’ve got more important things to do.