



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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WHO TEACHES ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY?

I admit guilt; I tricked my class even though they were a pleasing group. On Thursday morning when I walked into class we were all in high spirits because of the forthcoming fall break. I asked the class if any of them were going away for break. More than 90% said yes. How many are leaving Friday? Lots of hands went up in response. How many are leaving today (Thursday)? Many hands went up. How many have Friday classes? Several faces turned red and several eyes looked down. I gave them my usual little speech explaining how I did not understand paying tuition and then trying to get less in return for their money and the taxpayers' investments.

As their initial embarrassment began to wane and courage returned, their defense began: "but my __ class was canceled"; "but my ____ professor called class off"; "but my ____ class voted not to have class." The students were at least partially exonerated since they were not the guilty parties. We were. This scenario is not new and with the evidence of the past I suspect it will occur again at spring break, at Easter, at final examination time, at

A sense of personal commitment and personal accountability are qualities that we ought to instill and/or nurture in our students as we assist in their preparation for responsible careers and citizenship. But are we instilling these qualities when we cancel classes before vacations? Are we nurturing these qualities when we become lax with the "W" policy? In the fall of 1985, for example, we gave 2,649 W's, 1,069 after the free period. This adds up to around 7,947 credit hours (this might be good "business," but is it sound education?).

Some argue that the students lead complex lives. Perhaps this is a justification in part, but why does a commitment to academics seem to appear so low in their list of priorities? Is it maybe because we encourage it? Our cancellation of classes, for example, seems to condone and reinforce a "what can I get out of" attitude. Clearly we as faculty contribute to the malady even if our only contribution is silence.

Over the last few semesters I have been pleased by a sense of small but real improvement in the performance of my freshman classes. Once again I find myself using some of the more challenging exam questions which I had to shelve some years back, and I sense a growth in our students' academic potential. However, I do

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not sense a corresponding maturation in their attitudes toward academic endeavors. The college experience should help students improve attitudes of commitment and accountability. Do this and maybe in years to come we will experience more than a 50% voter turnout in national elections.

Recently, two advisees reported that they were receiving "W" grades in the tenth week of the term in spite of the "W" policy which eliminates free "W's" after the fifth week. The first advisee, a freshman, said, "My _____, ____, and _____ courses do not require any studying. This has made me lazy, so now I am failing my _____ course and need to withdraw from it." The second advisee, a sophomore, said, "My freshman year was just like high school and I got by doing the same things that I did in high school. But this year my courses are so different; it doesn't work now." These students could have resolved to buckle down, turn things around and fulfill their commitments, but it was too tempting to take advantage of the free escape that the late "W" now represents.

These unsolicited, poignant, somewhat acrimonious statements from young students impressed me. I believe students anticipate that college will be different from high school, and I think we can offer them something which is truly different, capitalizing on and satisfying their expectations by expecting responsible, mature academic commitment and behavior from them.

When the "W" policy says that the free "W" ends in the fifth week, we can impress students with our commitment to this rule and the principle behind it. When we approach vacations we can impress upon students that responsible adults meet their obligations until their obligations are truly completed. When students see that we respect our own academic responsibilities as well as theirs, they may begin to do the same.

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