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Policy-Driven Instruction at For-Profit Institutions

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Abstract

Lax policies have allowed more students to attend colleges and universities than ever before. This has brought about a rise in for-profit institutions that allow for many students who would otherwise not be able to earn a degree. Recently, for-profits have come under scrutiny for their predatory lending practices that saddle students with enormous amounts of debt. However, there has been little discussion of the teaching methods that instructors are forced to employ at these colleges. This article aims to explore the impact these schools have on their students from an instructor's perspective.

Keywords: For-Profit, Online Education, Policies

Introduction

Early spring, 2011. The email arrived in my inbox late Tuesday evening. It was from a student in Alabama, writing that she had finally finished her paper. Our last correspondence was an email the week prior saying she had a cold and her paper would be late. Now she was finished with it and felt the need to email me. Typical of many young college students, her email was plagued with misspellings and difficult to decipher. At the end of her email she begged me not to penalize her too many points for her tardiness.

I clicked reply. My email was simple. I told her I would not take points off. I wanted to.

According to the college, however, I couldn't. Earlier in the year, the school had adopted a policy stating late work up until the Wednesday after the assignment was due would be accepted without penalty. It was just one among many of the new policies the college had put into place this year to increase retention rates and raise grades among its growing ranks.

Later that evening, I stopped answering emails and started grading papers. At the time I was working for three colleges: a major Christian university, a community college, and this one, a degree mill. The headquarters oversees at least ten different colleges across the United States. In one state it is one name, in another it is different. Hence, a student enrolled at College A may find himself or herself in the same classroom with a student from College B.

The first essay was by a barely-passing student who had cobbled together information copied from the Internet. It had been 90% plagiarized. After jumping through hoops to locate the student academic incident form, I was reminded in bold, red letters on the form that instructors can only take 15% off a student's grade per paper for plagiarism. 15%. At any other higher education institution found across the United States – whether it be Harvard or a local community college – the assignment would have received a zero. Forms would be submitted. The academic incident report would be snuggled away in the student's file folder. Students who repeatedly plagiarized would be expelled from the institution.

At this college, however, one has to wonder how many reports were filed.

At any given time, over 30% of the students in these classrooms submit plagiarized essays.

An instructor at one of these colleges has to be extremely careful. Policies are in place to protect the students and limit the instructor's power. The majority of these types of colleges force instructors to pass a certain number of students. This college was no different.

I was required to pass 85% of my students.

If I started off the class with 20 students, and four completely disappeared off the map without withdrawing, I had to pass the remaining students or I was not eligible for rehire next term.

In recent weeks there has been much talk about how for-profit colleges take advantage of students financially. The spotlight has been placed on ITT Technical Institute, but an equal scrutiny has been placed on many of these for-profit institutions. A grid posted on the Chronicle of Higher Education shows the number of colleges that are currently under investigated either by the federal government or by individual states for varying practices, including providing false information about future job prospects to its students.

But not all for-profit schools employ shady practices, and while the focus has been on the financial aspect and lying to students about employment possibilities, there has not been much discussion about other ways in which these colleges are failing students. These colleges are churning out generations of underprepared students who think they have a future in various fields only to find their degrees worthless.

I will not state the name of the parent company, nor the college I worked for, but chances are that you have heard of it. States change, the names of the individual colleges change, but in the end, degree mills are all the same. If one took a yardstick to measure the quality of student work, Harvard and other Ivy Leagues would rank high, along with state universities and schools ranging somewhere between the top and middle. Even community colleges would rank high. Degree mills, on the other hand, would even barely register on the bottom of the stick.

After a break, I returned to grading. Next to me was a printout of the grading rubric. Assignments are submitted weekly. They can run the gamut from a one-sentence thesis statement to selecting three or four sources from the online library to employ for a research paper. This rubric is extremely important, and it must be followed at all times.

Did the student put his or her name on the paper?

Check. That's five points, according to the rubric.

Date? Check. Five points.

Are there spelling errors in the two-page document? A four year old might have better spelling. That means the student doesn't earn five points for that.

Did the student format the document correctly? He or she did, so that's another five points.

Our of twenty points, the student earned fifteen for a one-sentence assignment.

75%.

On a similar assignment at a university or community college, the student submitting this would award a zero. At the very least, the instructor would send the assignment back for a rewrite.

When I was first hired by this college, I was entered into an online training class with over a hundred other instructors from around the nation. At the time I had little understanding of just what a degree mill was, but by the time I left, a year later, I realized I wasn't really an instructor at this college. My work gave the impression I was an instructor, but it was more the notion of an instructor. It was kind of like the idea of an instructor. I replied to comments and posts in the discussion board. I graded essays. Yet I could never shake off the feeling that I was little more than front-counter help at a fast-food restaurant.

Even students that performed well would not have done satisfactorily at a community college, and they would never have survived at a place like UMass or UCLA.

One has to wonder how the other instructors involved in the training felt after they finished teaching their first few classes at the college. I don't know. I know I felt angry. I felt angry because many students who passed my class only did so thanks to policy. There were semesters where no student earned an A. In one class, not one student earned above a C; which warranted a complaint from my supervisor that I was too strict.

I felt guilty, too. I felt guilty because I wondered what kind of future these students had after graduating. Some couldn't spell the name of the college they were attending, much less compose a paper that contained a shred of original thought.

I was angry about compensation, too. On top of the insane number of training videos I had to watch and become 'certified' in, we were required to pay out of pocket for professional development. I attended a teaching conference in Atlanta, GA on the subject of college composition, and this college didn't accept it. That was the last straw. I had been accepted to begin my doctoral work, and I decided to let this college know I was leaving. Though angry, I left with dignity, but my experience at this college left its mark.

These colleges exist. The work they require students to do is mediocre, and even the label 'instructor' is misleading. The classes are programmed. They require someone's presence, but not much else. Announcements are prepackaged. Instructors just need to include their names. Policies crimp instructor freedom – from the number of words required for a reply post to a student in the discussion board to how instructors are required to reply to every email a student sends, including ones that say 'thanx.'

While we as a nation need more educated individuals to keep us competitive on the world stage, these colleges have taken the fundamental concept of earning a degree and turned it into a cafeteria. Students are graded more on effort than they are on actual performance. Most students leave the classroom without even a basic understanding of the concepts being presented. How can these students compete with students who have submitted legitimate work at a legitimate college? They can't. One of the fields these colleges focus on is nursing. Does that scare you yet? It should.