

A Breach of Contract

By W. Reid Cornwell

With the decrease in the number of students qualifying for college, increasingly institutions rely on the reputations of their faculty to attract families to their campuses. They tout the number of Nobel Laureates, Turing prize winners, or other such awards as evidence of institutional stature.

Universities and colleges actively recruit high profile people to beef up the institutional resume'. They give them big salaries, big titles and little responsibility.

Ordinary professors are put on a diet of "publish or perish." Few accolades are available to highly successful scholars who only wish to teach. In fact, if a Professor wants to be a great teacher, but not publish, they are unlikely to get tenure and the protection it affords.

Success in academia is measured by how much grant money a Professor can garner. If they are highly successful they can use their grant money to buy out their teaching requirements. As a result, most undergraduate students will never get access to these scientists or scholars.

The institutions, that require some teaching load, will allow a Professor to use graduate students to take the lion's share of the teaching responsibility. Unfortunately, these graduate students lack the preparation, training, content expertise, language skills or personality to do the job well.

Few senior Professors want to teach introductory courses. It is a common practice to let some graduate student carry this load. However, they have their own classes and requirements to manage. The result is poor classroom preparation, lack of availability and slowness to return tests and other indicators of progress. The supervision by a senior Professor is often an illusion.

The result is that the least capable instructors in the academic community are teaching the neediest students. This combination is deadly for struggling students.

Let's revisit the notion that tests are returned slowly. Today I learned of a Chemistry Professor that decided to take an introductory course last spring. He complained about the quality of instruction but more importantly he reported that despite repeated requests he had not had his final exam returned.

For a struggling student the tests are the way they find out what they don't know. In a science or mathematics courses, ones that are based on building a systems of laws or rules, if you take three weeks to return a test and you move on in building the foundation, a student can be in over their head and not know until it is too late. This is a recipe for failure.

At all levels of education, this slow return practice is common.

Take my neighbor's son. At mid-term he reported a "B" average in calculus: at final he failed. He had in fact failed his mid-term but the graduate assistant did not give back the test until a week before the final. By that point he was drowning and did not know it.

If you contracted with a master carpenter to perform some service and instead his junior assistant showed up you would be upset. If an ad promised a product of a certain quality but when it arrived at your house it was not that same standard you would call it "Bait and Switch". Under the law this is fraud and a breach of contract.

Yet everyday colleges promise the credibility of the major professors and what they deliver is a graduate student. How is this different than "Bait and switch?"

If your carpenter promises to deliver his service at a certain time with a certain quality and he did not, you would be irate.

When a University publishes that Dr. Aristotle will teach a class and his graduate assistant, in fact does, how is this different?

In my backwoods thinking, this is a breach of contract of epic proportions! The consequence may be catastrophic to your child.

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