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Academic Rigor and How I Failed College Chemistry

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Academic Rigor and How I Failed College Chemistry

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Academic Rigor and How I Failed College Chemistry

Darek Benesh

Truthfully, when I first received the e-mail with the heading *Academic Rigor* (inviting me to write this essay), I thought the message would contain an advertisement for one of those pseudo-wonder pills which claim to remedy deficiencies in such thiemory recall or attention span – some way to increase antioxidants or neuron transmittingpotential. *Academic Rigor: A Panacea for What Ails Education Today*. In our culture, multimillion-dollar industries revolve around such myths – the “quick-fix” for difficult issues.

Like the myth of the “quick-fix” in today’s society, however, *academic rigor*, as a concept and as a realization, often remains ambiguous or abstract. Relative to learning at a university, the phrase can be interpreted in terms of an instructor’s responsibilities, of course, but it can be interpreted just as easily in terms of a student’s responsibilities. And what does society in general make of this topic? Whose fault was it I failed *College Chemistry*?

Yes, I failed *College Chemistry*, and I want to get that out in the open right away. It was the spring of my freshman year at a community college, and an unspoken, mutual agreement between my parents and I was weighing on my conscience: if I wasn’t going to do well in college, maybe I would have to make other plans. “Other plans” would have probably meant I wouldn’t now have to be concerned about phrases containing the word “academic.”

At that time, I was a biology major, eager to learn, with an enthusiasm for the “science of life” originating in high school. I was sure college was the right place for me. After all, even now, doesn’t our society tell us that everyone has the right to go to college? Doesn’t our society tell us that if we want to go to college, then that’s where we should be, regardless of anything else?

Unfortunately, my high school grades had been generally at or below average. However, in high school, I had been impressed by the biology teacher's eagerness to explore, investigate, and learn – by his sense of wonderment for the world around him. His class was challenging, difficult, and rigorous. I enjoyed learning, and somehow my enjoyment was linked with the challenging nature of the class. I remember this teacher saying that students shouldn't concentrate on grades, but on learning and the enjoyment of learning. I received a B on my report card, but I can still explain osmosis, photosynthesis, the function of mitochondria, and how a nephron works. I guess my current understanding of *academic rigor* began in my high school biology class; however, at that time, a realization of this understanding in practice was still vague.

I failed *College Chemistry*, and I might have even whispered to myself once or twice during the class, "I just don't get it." There were more than a few classmates who also seemed to be whispering to themselves, and sometimes not whispering, and sometimes cursing. Enough classmates, in fact, that we could have formed a failure support group, but sometimes just standing around before class and kicking our shoes at the floor while incomplete homework lurked somewhere in the depths of our backpacks generated sufficient solace.

I failed *College Chemistry*, and I just didn't get it. I considered seeking additional help from the instructor, coming in early, stopping by during office hours, or asking questions in class. All of these would have required actually attempting the assignments first so I would know which questions to ask. I just didn't have enough time, and all the while I could sense those other "non-academic" plans creeping closer. But there was no denying it, failing *College Chemistry* was my fault, and the time factor – that was an excuse. Something was bothering me. I understood what my part in *academic rigor* should have been, but I felt ill-equipped to act in any way.

Where should I have been equipped for the rigors of college life? At home, I suppose, or in high school. Still, considering the six years I spent teaching full-time or substituting in high schools, I know I was better prepared for college than some students are currently.

The high school students I taught presumed that simply turning in all the assignments would earn an A grade, and that failure was the result of simply failing to turn in assignments. I tried my best as a teacher to resist the status quo and maintain high expectations, believing that students would rise to meet the challenge and consequently learn more from the class. This belief mostly remained true, since higher expectations do result in more successes. If only this held as true for all students.

I taught English, and come parent-teacher conference time, I didn't have any multiple-choice exam scores to show the parents who wanted to know why their son or daughter was failing my class. I had papers – pieces of writing – and I had to explain to parents that simply completing an assignment was not enough to pass, and not enough to earn an A. There was something else involved entirely. It involved thinking and rising to a challenge, demonstrating thought and reasoning in an engaged way through language. Time after time, after being called down to the principal's office to have an *administrator*-parent-teacher conference, the parent would ask me, "OK, look, just tell me what my kid needs to do to pass your class." The parent would frown grimly and look pretentious. If only I would have thought of recommending an *academic rigor* "pseudo-wonder" pill to them at that time.

The pressure to alter my grading scale increased. I was accused of teaching "World Literature" like it was a college class. I was accused of speaking with a British accent – whatever that meant in regards to my teaching or my students' learning. (I've never even been to the U.K.) I was accused of showing favoritism toward the students who were earning A grades over those who were failing, as if somehow that explained why some papers lacked logical structure despite my recommendations. (Interestingly enough, the division between the two groups of students was about 50/50, with a few students in the C range.) There is no doubt that the pressure and the accusations caused great stress, and I began to think my life would be made so much easier if I would just give in and bump the F grades up to C grades instead. This has a name, I thought to myself. It is called *grade inflation*.

A discussion of *academic rigor* will always ultimately lead to a discussion of grade inflation. It is much easier for high school teachers to lower their expectations than to have to fight against the communities in which they live and work – especially considering all the student behavior problems which take up most of the actual instruction time to deal with. I offer some of my experiences in high school teaching to demonstrate the background of most students entering colleges and universities today. Most college freshmen today expect A grades, not necessarily because they have earned A grades in the past, but because they have been *given* A grades in the past. For the most part, the students have high confidence, but their confidence is often misplaced. Some students are accustomed to confusing “rights” with “privileges.” Of course, I am not implying that all students have received grades they haven’t earned. Many students are deserving of high grades. Half of my high school “World Literature” class earned A grades and had aspirations to attend institutions of higher learning after graduation. The problem is that a large percentage of the other half of my class had aspirations to attend college, too – some of them despite the realities of F grades. And what if I had chosen to avoid teacher burnout by caving to the pressure of the students, parents, school, and community?

I suspect high school teachers do this every day. No one wants to live a difficult life for very long, and not everyone can move and go to graduate school full-time like I have been able to do. Teachers have been fired over having too high expectations for students¹; after all, high school students shouldn’t be expected to do college-level work and try to understand a British accent at the same time. (Please excuse the sarcasm.) And somewhere there are still those voices echoing, “Just tell me what my kid needs to do to pass your class.”

This high school grade inflation must have ramifications for colleges and universities. Does a C grade in college mean average anymore? Does an A grade mean “superior”? If too many students get A grades, does it somehow undermine the concept, worth, and prestige of a *higher education*? In 2004, Princeton University issued a series of

¹ Read: Charles Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, New York, 1995.

recommendations to faculty concerning grade inflation. They recommended a common grading standard for all departments, restricting the number of A grades to a maximum of thirty-five percent in undergraduate courses.² Should all institutions of higher learning adopt similar guidelines?

Perhaps fears of grade inflation will always be associated with *academic rigor*; however, we might be placing undue emphasis on its realities and consequences. It seems that grade inflation, as with economic inflation, is a natural by-product of relatively free institutions that are ultimately dependent upon money. And with this, I believe, instructors and students have altered their perceptions. That is, if a C is the new F, consider the implications of earning a C. If a B is the new C, consider the implications of earning a B. Basically, going from a formal five-level scale to an informal three-level scale has increased the negative ramifications of earning anything below an A.

In 1993, I failed *College Chemistry* because, for whatever reason, I was not mentally and academically prepared for the rigors of college. And, obviously, since I taught English in high school, failing chemistry *did* change the course of my academic life – from appreciating life through science, to appreciating life through language. However, in 1994, after deciding upon a path that would lead me into the study of foreign languages, TESOL, English literature, and teaching, I retook *College Chemistry* and got a B.

Something had changed. I was motivated to learn and succeed as I hadn't been in high school or in my first experiences with college. What happened was, in the meantime, I had taken a class called *Introduction to Fiction*, and the instructor's teaching revealed to me that there is actually meaning in well-crafted stories. Literature meant something. Between 1993 and 1994, I learned to read. The connection between functional literacy and success should never be underestimated! Reading critically, as we all know, has implications far beyond the literature classroom.

² Source: Eric Hoover, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 50 no. 33 (April 23, 2004) A40.

I had gained the same enthusiasm and eagerness to investigate and learn that I had perceived in my high school Biology teacher. I saw difficulty as a challenge, and started to create my own interests within any given class. It is true, in a community college, or even when I transferred to UNI as an undergraduate in 1995, there were classes which were exceedingly boring and which felt disconnected from practicality; but, I now had more agency in my learning. I learned I could make my education my own, and to appreciate rigorous academic work as a worthwhile challenge.

Assuming that instructors are doing everything in their power to provide a wonderfully rich and challenging learning experience, I believe the solution to the *academic rigor* problem, if we want to perceive it as a problem, lies within the students. What follows, then, is a list of criteria or recommendations for students to consider in their academic life.

1. You are learning for yourself, not others. Learn to think beyond your place in a small group. Avoid cliques which do not prioritize maximum effort for maximum success. Engage in selfish learning. That is, learn for the sake of learning, not to please others or to fit in. Challenge yourself to be the absolute best and to reach your potential. Do not live your life knowing that someday you will look back and regret not giving everything you could to your learning. Follow the advice of my high school biology teacher and worry about “learning” something, not about receiving good grades. If you work hard, the grades will usually take care of themselves.

2. Avoid the grade question from other students. If others ask you how well you did on a particular assignment or test, your answer should always be, “I did OK,” or just simply, “Fine.” Your classmates are asking either because they want to gloat (publicly or privately) if they did better than you, or because they want to ostracize you from their group for being more dedicated to learning than they are. These people seem to need others to make them feel good about themselves, or they need excuses to rationalize why they are not doing well. They like phrases like, “You did well, but that’s because you’re smart.” And remember, you shouldn’t be learning simply for grades anyway.

3. Learn in a way that works for you. Make the learning yours. Create situations that relate the material covered in class with areas you are enthusiastic about. How does

the women's suffrage movement of nineteenth-century America relate to the Japanese social structure of today? How does the increase in non-linear plotlines in movies relate to the increase in society's internet usage? Take whatever you are studying and relate it to what you are interested in – or to a documentary you might have seen on public television three years ago. Expand your web of knowledge. This is what being educated is all about.

4. Become generally knowledgeable about a wide range of topics. Open your eyes and ears. Pay attention. Investigate issues that are bothering you. Send instructors e-mail messages and expand upon issues that piqued your interest in class. And be highly knowledgeable in at least one area that greatly interests you. Most people already have one area of great interest, they just need to focus that interest.

5. Be creative. I believe it is myth that some people are inherently non-creative. Every person has the potential to be creative in some way. Usually not being creative is the result of not having developed enough interests. The world is vast, and our potential interpretations of the world are even greater. If writing a research paper on *Wuthering Heights* seems boring, ask the instructor if you could write the paper as a dialogue between three of the main characters. You might find that, in so doing, you will actually produce a more exciting and extensive paper than you would have otherwise created, and the research involved will take on more significance.

6. Go above and beyond the minimum requirements if you can. If an assignment requires an analysis of two points in a text, why not analyze three points. If the visual arts interest you, add pictures to your papers and presentations, add colors and visual aids. If a fiction writing class requires you to write three stories, strive to make your stories three-times as long and three-times as interesting as anyone else's.

7. If an assignment has to be done, just do it. Don't make excuses and don't complain. My instructor for the "Introduction to Fiction" class I mentioned above once said, "If you have an assignment which needs to be done, do it, even it means staying up all night to get it done." Although that is a little extreme, the basic sentiments behind the comment are these: taking personal responsibility makes all the difference to becoming a successful learner. The value of rigor in academics comes from within.

Lastly, a final look at grading from a teacher's perspective might help to frame future discussions. In teaching *College Reading and Writing* here at UNI, I am confronted with several issues regarding grading. Are the students to be assessed in terms of their individual progress from the beginning of the semester to the end? Are the students to be assessed relative to other students, based on their papers? Or, are the students to be assessed relative to what I believe their potential for growth is? And how is *academic rigor* to be interpreted within this framework?

The section of *College Reading and Writing* that I am teaching this semester is comprised mostly of students whose first language is one other than English. They are already doing something that most American students will never do: becoming functionally fluent in another language. I taught ESL for six years, so I have a greater sensitivity to the rhetorical styles of different cultures, and a greater tolerance for and understanding of grammatical and usage concerns. I could recognize at the beginning of the semester that many of these students' papers were structurally and grammatically different from what I might expect from a native English speaker, given the same assignment. It can be argued that, in this case, a greater emphasis in *academic rigor* is warranted - by both students and the instructor in order to have students attain a certain expected level by the end of the semester.

Does this mean, then, that there is a certain level of academic rigor and success which is expected in college, regardless of grades? Although it is difficult to define, the answer is ultimately yes.

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