Tenure Decisions

"Every year at least one extremely effective teacher leaves the Institute when his contract is not renewed by his department. This year it is Professor Eric Hansen . . ."

The Tech, April 8, 1969

Last year the same department, Political Science, refused to renew John Solomons' contract. It left him to take his teaching interest and ability elsewhere. And as students were finishing their final exams and professors' summer vacations, a departmental memo revealed that Robert Kalenkow, two years ago winner of the Baker Award for excellence in undergraduate education, would not be teaching here next fall.

These decisions, of course, must reflect priorities established within the department, school, or Institute itself. Someone, someone must be periodically reviewing MIT's tenure and declining to renew the careers of individual faculty members. But students have a right to know how their departments are setting their priorities, and how this setting affects their education. Similarly, the concept that good research is the primary prerequisite for good teaching should be subjected to a much more extensive and open debate than has yet developed, since this attitude will have a profound effect on the quality of MIT's undergraduate education.

Any institution must surely invite returns to the research/education dilemma invested in this page on back December. We noted that the community here treat undergraduate education as a chore and view teaching as the pursuit of those professors not good enough to make the grade in research. In this respect, the physics administrator who told us that the department felt Kalenkow would be happiest at another school may well have been correct perhaps elsewhere he will find the respect his teaching merits but the consequences of this attitude for MIT's education may well be heavy.

Students, then, have too large a stake in tenure decisions to be ignored. Departments have an obligation to develop mechanisms for both inquiring student opinion and explaining policy decisions and their effects. Undergraduates pay the tuition bill, and they have the right to investigate the quality of the education they receive.

Grades

Once again it's the time of year for students to receive their semester grades. Perhaps it would be appropriate to review the evaluation mechanisms here in the hope of providing advice to the numerous students who were shafted by their grade reports.

By and large, the grade system here is a disaster. Grades should serve two purposes: a feedback mechanism to help students and professors evaluate progress in their departments, and, in some cases, a way of ranking the relative abilities of students.

By no stretch of the imagination can current practice provide the kinds of feedback mechanisms. Often the quizzes and exams designed to emphasize standard, easily solved (if you know the professor's pet shortcut) problems at playing games while penalizing those who strive to understand the true ability of their students.

Make an appointment to meet with the chair of your department. Discuss the pros and cons of the current grading system, emphasizing that it may well be deceiving his professors about the true ability of their students.

Talk with members of the faculty committee on educational policy. Their group is responsible for monitoring the overall educational quality of the Institute. Emphasize that current grading systems often only reward those students who develop a shallow understanding of their subject while penalizing or bewildering those seeking a true education.

The AICDF members are William Martin (chairman), Robert Halfman, Franklin Fisher, Frederick Frey, Robert Gallager, Leon Groisser, Kent Hansen, Vernon Ingram, Marcus Karel, Stanley Biever, R. H. Newman and Rainer Weis. Undoubtedly there is a member from your school, if not your department itself. Course and office numbers are all listed in the Institute (faculty) directory.

We are not trying to make point and win our argument by initiating a pest campaign against the faculty. But it is really impossible to watch other students suffer for only so long before one begins casting about for remedies. Perhaps the faculty members don't realize the extent of the problem their current grading systems are causing. It is true that their tests penalize the very creativity their courses should inspire.

In any case, nothing will be gained by students who have attempted to grasp the course material. Perhaps it would be inappropriate to tell their faculty members don't realize the extent of the problem their current grading systems are causing. It is true that their tests penalize the very creativity their courses should inspire.

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