
DUST FROM THE CHALKBOARD



What Would You Attempt to Do . . . If You Knew You Could Not Fail?

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We were intrigued by this question posed by Dr. Robert Schuller. Doubtless, he posed it for purposes of Christian reflection. Yet, its significance for education is equally profound.

The American higher education system seems to operate on the basis of a great many flawed or inappropriate assumptions and traditions. We have all known “educators” who believe that the only good class is a “hard”

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class. They may believe that their educational mission is one of “weeding out” weaker students (which, by the way, is NOT an educational mission at all!) and that every class must have some students who fail. Individuals who teach in accordance with these philosophies will invariably create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

All too often, this philosophy of “hard is better” becomes a rationalization for not having to teach effectively. That is, if we truly believe that some students must fail, then there is no compelling reason to improve teaching when student failures occur. Certainly, there is no compelling reason for us to search for improved educational techniques, for ways by which learning barriers can be removed, or even to examine the educational environment to ascertain the cause of the failures.

The Bell Curve, which was originally imposed at the University of Missouri more than 75 years ago as a method of *protecting* students from the unfair grading practices of faculty, has become a distorted and flawed tradition of universities which has been summarized by Dr. Robert Persig in the following way:

Grades really cover up a failure to teach. A bad instructor can go through an entire quarter leaving absolutely nothing memorable in the minds of his class, curve out the scores on an irrelevant test, and leave the impression that some have learned and some have not.

The antithesis of the “hard is better” philosophy is NOT grade escalation, but rather, teaching that strives for successful outcomes. In reality, improved teaching effectiveness will invariably result in increased grades. Yet, this is an outcome with which many faculty feel uncomfortable.

Particularly in professional programs we should be graduating entire classes of “A” and “B” students who have actually achieved “A” and “B” levels of competency. Ironically, the teaching skills and techniques required to achieve these ends are available, but tend to be ignored.

What is required is an abandonment of educational traditions that serve only to excuse less effective teaching as a cause of academic failures and which encourage adoption of the more pleasing explanation that students have failed to prepare themselves adequately to the task at hand.

Imagine what education could become if all educators truly made academic success our mission! Imagine what our students could accomplish if we would strive to remove the barriers to learning, as opposed to leaving a few in place here and there to insure a few failures in order to maintain an arbitrary curve of some kind.

What would *you* attempt to do if you knew you could not fail? This is not a concept of success as a result of “giving away” high grades, but

rather, involves success as a result of helping students to achieve a desirable level of competency. What would our students attempt to master if this concept became the credo of American higher education? What a wonderful environment our hallowed halls of the ivory tower could become if questionable traditions were abandoned in favor of true educational objectives.

Dr. Charles Richmond at the University of Central Oklahoma College of Education has said, "The trouble with the traditions is that after a while, they ceased to be questioned."

Isn't it about time we in education began to question some of our traditions?