

Hear No Evil, See No Evil

Ontario universities are pretending that their students are well prepared for post-secondary.
By Thomas J. Collins

I am a professor of English, and in 1997/98 I taught first-year English to a lecture class of 130 students; in my tutorial I had 17 students whose essays and tests I personally marked. I had not taught and marked for a first-year group in over 20 years, and I found the experience shocking.

Hesitant to rely solely on my own experience and impressions, I consulted with colleagues with extensive first-year teaching experience in the departments of Classical Studies, History, Mathematics, Chemistry, and English, and also with the Dean of Education.

In addition, I had access to two relevant documents: a study of the “grade drop” (that is, the difference between OAC averages and first-year university grades) at Western from 1993-94 to 1996-97, and a recent survey by Western’s University Students’ Council on professorial perceptions of the quality of the writing skills of undergraduate students.

Finally, I had information concerning the results of a standard first-year test which has been administered to all incoming chemistry students for almost 20 years.

While the following comments do not pretend to be based totally on statistical evidence, they do reflect some such analysis, and they also reflect judgments which are firmly held by a wide cross-section of the professoriate, including myself.

For the most part, the students entering our first year are ill-prepared to undertake university studies. Many (a majority in my view) do not possess rudimentary skills in reading, writing, or thinking, although I am told that those who choose courses in Mathematics are numerate.

My personal experience of this past year clearly indicates, however, that one cannot assume even a moderate degree of literacy from those who *elect* to study first-year English. Presumably these students think, or have been led to believe, that they are at least proficient in this subject.

At the High School Level

Those who are more familiar with the high school system than I tell me that there are two major factors which contribute to this situation. First, many subjects such as English increasingly are not taught by subject specialists. Secondly, there remains in the school system far too much emphasis, at least in Ontario, on catering to the students’ sense of self-esteem.

Then there is the matter of grade inflation. The “grade drop” of those students who entered Western from 1993 to 1996-97 has been disconcerting to the students, to the high schools, and to the university. These students had a mean OAC average of 79.5% and a mean first-year grade at Western of 65.3% — for a mean first-year grade drop of 14.2%.

In the chemistry test mentioned above, the average mark dropped from 64% to 48% over the years.

Their inflated high school grades lead students to have expectations of themselves that they cannot possibly fulfill in their first-year courses. It is hard to believe that this situation is peculiar to Western, and one should avoid the speculation that our professors make unreasonable demands and/or mark too severely.

At the University Level

Of my 17 first-year tutorial students, only four wrote at an acceptable level of literacy—i.e., they were able to construct basic sentences and paragraphs. The other 13 students were frustrated and embarrassed by the gap between what they had been led to believe they could achieve and their actual level of accomplishment in my tutorial.

But it is not just the secondary schools which are guilty of grade inflation. If I and my colleagues were to mark these students according to their *actual* abilities, the grade drop would be much higher than it is.

But we do not do so, for a complex number of reasons, not the least of which is that Western recently

adopted an invidious internal funding system which rewards faculties and departments financially for attracting and retaining additional students in post year-one courses.

This matter has been openly and fully discussed by those of us who share the teaching of first-year English. The point made in such discussions is simply this: don’t mark the students too honestly or we will have few students in upper years, thus losing funds and probably faculty positions.

Why do not the universities attack the problem of this lack of basic skills in our year-one students? The answer, simply, is money. To solve it would cost huge sums of money which, administrators believe, should instead be spent on “relevant” areas like communications, technology, and applied science.

There is one other important reason why universities fail to address the issue of ill-prepared students and inflated OAC marks. Universities are in competition with each other for good students (ie, students with superior marks) and for high numbers of student enrolments (because they mean money). Individual universities are therefore extremely cautious about offending potential applicants.

The possibility of testing incoming university students and offering remedial courses as necessary has been much and frequently discussed in various jurisdictions and always rejected, precisely because of its complexity and cost.

My students tended to have excellent computer skills but nothing to process beyond the gibberish I encountered in their essays. We must face this problem and solve it, or we will increasingly become a nation of semi-literates.

(Dr. Collins is the former Vice-President Academic at the University of Western Ontario. Excerpted with permission from a much longer paper at www.cmec.ca/postsec/transitions/en/431.collins.pdf)