

# Underappreciated Undergraduates

*This scheme is designed to mitigate professors' contempt for classroom teaching.*

**By Rodney A. Clifton and Hymie Rubenstein**

Teaching, especially instructing undergraduate students, at large research universities (Alberta, Dalhousie, Manitoba, McGill, Toronto, British Columbia, etc.) has never been a highly-regarded part of the academic enterprise.

At many institutions, professors often teach out of necessity, not because they love teaching or because they are inspiring teachers. A professor at the University of Michigan stated: "Every minute I spend in an undergraduate classroom is costing me money and prestige." The President of Harvard University was advised that teaching undergraduates is a waste of talented scholars.

This kind of attitude may not represent the position of the majority of Canadian professors, but there are a great many who show disrespect for classroom teaching, including those who succeed in negotiating reductions in their instructional 'loads' if they receive research grants or assume administrative responsibilities.

As a consequence, critics both inside and outside the university have noted that undergraduate students are often short-changed by professors who teach ineffectually, arbitrarily cancel classes, are indifferent to the learning outcomes of their students, and employ outdated course material.

Besieged from without and beset from within, universities are slowly, often reluctantly, paying more attention to the quality of teaching that undergraduate students receive.

Many universities now conduct and publicly distribute the results of standardized surveys of teaching, reward a few of their best teachers with monetary or other benefactions, and boast teaching centres offering workshops and short courses to help new and established professors improve their instruction.

But as useful as these initiatives may be, they seem to have had little effect on raising the general quality of instruction. Why is this?

The poor teachers are rarely punished, let alone fired, regardless of whether or not they are evaluated. And the teaching centres have limited effectiveness because poor teachers are rarely, if ever, forced to take courses to improve their performance — let alone change their ways.

Likewise, granting teaching awards to a few super-stars has virtually no effect on the instructional proficiency of the vast majority of professors, even within the same department. In fact, some professors privately say that they would be ashamed to be recognized as an outstanding teacher, an appellation that is often taken to mean that one is "a mere teacher."

The ironical result of the publication of student-based course evaluations is that when students avoid courses taught by poor teachers, this actually makes the poor teachers better off. Having fewer students translates into lighter teaching loads, which translates into more time for scholarship, the part of the job that receives the most rewards.

Conversely, good teachers are often made worse off because they are saddled with a disproportionate number of students, particularly struggling students. Under this system, good teachers have more essays to mark, more tests to grade, more students to advise, more weak students to help — and less time to conduct research.

The result is that universities have, if only inadvertently, institutionalized a system in which good professors are punished for teaching well, while poor professors are rewarded for teaching badly.

This perverse incentive system leads to an important challenge: how to make course evaluations (and allied sources of information) effective tools for rewarding good teaching and punishing poor teaching. We suggest that this can be done by applying the basic principles of cooperative learning and team-based management.

The application of these principles can be illustrated by a simple hypothetical example. Suppose that the evaluations of courses and professors range from a low of 1 to a high of 10 on a reliable and valid evaluation form. Average teaching scores, weighted by the number of students in the various courses, are calculated for each teaching department. Now assume that 20% of university departments (as opposed to individual professors) have overall average scores above 7, and that 20% have average scores below 4.

Departments with an average teaching score above a certain level, say level 7, would be given credits for additional resources — more money for teaching assistants and supplies; upgraded classrooms and lab facilities; a greater share of the library budget; etc. — while departments below a certain level, say level 4, would lose credits. Those in between would neither gain nor lose credits.

A performance-based reward system would ensure that members of a department would consider how the assignment of people would help the average performance of their department. Few departments, for example, would put their worst and most inexperienced teachers in large first-year classes, as often now occurs. Department members would employ peer pressure and other sanctions to oblige their worst teachers to improve their performances, something that rarely occurs now.

Collegial performance-based reward systems such as the one proposed above, are more likely to enhance the quality of our universities than the needs-based reward systems that are currently in place.

*(Dr. Clifton and Dr. Rubenstein are professors at the University of Manitoba. Adapted with permission from "Collegial Models for Enhancing the Performance of University Professors, published by the Fraser Institute, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2002)*