

More by Eric Mattison

Lest I create the impression that the drop in academics is solely due to external forces, let me comment on us, the students. Honestly, we are whiny. We are the ones who demand curves on tests and extra-credit projects when we are in trouble. We remain silent, taking advantage of lowered academic standards that garner us A's on all of the tests for which we barely study. We are the ones who demand easy crossover courses (such as Language Diversity in the US to fulfill LP credit) in order to negotiate the Program of Liberal Studies. In this manner, we can avoid leaving our chosen field of interest, and thereby avoid the "universal" education that we should get at college. By being whiny little brats, demanding good grades, we don't get the criticism of our work that we need. As a result, our work is shoddy.

There are solutions to this problem, however. All professors need to get tougher on students, and demand more from them. Administration must help out as well, backing up "tough" professors rather than letting them go. A new system for tenure candidacy must not only account for student popularity of professors, but with which students professors are popular. If a student with an impeccable academic record says that a professor is good, while another student with a poor academic record damns that same professor, the difference between the students must be noted.

The other solution to this problem is one that we can solve ourselves. We must first ask our professors for a greater challenge, and then be more accepting of criticism when we get it. After all, criticism is the only way to learn how to do our work better.

Finally, as an addendum, I feel that I should say that there are good, tough teachers there. Some of my best classes were with the hardest teachers: Shakespeare with Vaughn, social geography with Bowden, modern philosophy with Derr, and European history with Lucas. Another way of finding good professors is finding the ones who know that they will never receive tenure. Louis Bastein is a great example—he is one of the best teachers at Clark and teaches a number of different subjects, even though his outspoken ways will keep him a safe distance away from tenure. I also know a good number of students who really care about what they are learning, rather than what grade they are getting. It is a shame we don't have more of them.

While getting a good, challenging education here at Clark (or at any American university) is possible, both poor students and poor teachers make classes here an academic minefield. It shouldn't be.

Recently, I took a test and received a 16/20. I am not complaining that I should have received a higher grade. In fact, I am protesting that I did not receive a lower one.

In order to understand my position, I need to explain the grading of this test. There were four questions, each worth five points. When one gave an especially good answer, that student would receive a "plus" next to the circled five, meaning that his or her grade would be increased, say from a B+ to an A-. The teacher also told us that any extra pluses would not boost our grade any further. I received two fives with pluses. Along with my two five-pluses, I received a one (oops) and another five. It is this last five that bothers me. For comments, the teacher wrote, "You forgot to answer the other half of the question...but you have full credit anyway." By the teacher's own words, I should have received a maximum of a 2.5 on that question. Was the teacher giving me extra points for the extra plus?

I see this experience of mine as a microcosmic example of the lowering of academic standards in college education. My view was reinforced when I talked with an Australian friend who was taking an exchange semester at Boston College. He told me that he found the academic standards here in the US the same as his junior high school back home. The drop in academic standards here takes place very often, and for a number of reasons.

Grade inflation, such as I experienced, is all too prevalent. I can no longer count the times when after getting a test back, someone has raised their hand to ask, "Will this be curved?" Too often it is. Consequently, the spectrum of difference between what is a good grade and what is a bad grade has merely narrowed. However, students are still competitive, even if grading has become an exercise in confidence-building. The lack of a grading spectrum coupled with highly competitive students now means that anything less than an A is the same as an F.

Another problem relating to the loss of academic standards is the acquiescence of the professors to let it happen. Often, professors give students the right to choose the format of an exam, allow them to use notes and books during the exam, and even know the questions in advance. Also, often professors will teach down to the class, instructing classes in facts and figures that are easy to memorize, but mean little on their own. I do not fault the professors for this dumbing down process, however, because they have to deal with external pressures. Many professors are in the "tenure game"; they are trying to find job security. Tenure candidates must be popular with students, and students like professors that test easily. Rumor that a teacher is "hard" can be the kiss of death to that professor, for their class size may shrink dramatically. Here is the main root of the fall of academia: there is less challenge, and

The 24-Hour TIMELINE continued...

- sends herself home to change clothes (a non-smoker smelling like a 40 year old chain smoker).
- 3:00 am — Tom stops by again. Mac breaks then Mac fixes it. Desktop rebuilt. All set.
- 3:09 am — Discussion about Jim Samar's letter to The Scarlet. The pros and cons of Jim Samar jokes. Unusually, good taste triumphs.
- 3:32 am — Mac asks what did you do?
- 3:35 am — Emily announces that women should sit quietly in the corner.