



# BACKGROUND

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## How to Improve Undergraduate Teaching

A Performance-based Accountability System

By Rodney A. Clifton

## Executive Summary

**“Surprisingly, teaching evaluations are not used systematically to improve the quality of teaching.”**

At present, undergraduate teaching at Canada’s research universities is not highly respected by administrators. Nevertheless, universities are being forced to pay more attention to the quality of their undergraduate teaching by students.

While most universities use teaching evaluations, the focus of the evaluations is to provide information to professors about their own teaching and to help students select courses. Surprisingly, teaching evaluations are not used systematically to improve the quality of teaching.

This backgrounder outlines a performance-based reward system designed to improve undergraduate teaching, where departments would be rewarded based on an average of all teaching performances within the department.

# Introduction

Currently, administrators at Canada's universities, particularly at the research universities (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, UBC, etc.) do not value undergraduate teaching. In fact, they consider teaching, and especially teaching undergraduate students, of much less value than bringing in research grants and publishing articles and books (see, for example, Clark, Trick, & Van Loon, 2011; Hacker & Dreifus, 2010, 78). The devaluation of undergraduate teaching has been acknowledged in a number of recent books with provocative titles such as: *Ivory tower blues: A university system in crisis* (Cote & Allahar, 2007), *Higher education? How colleges are wasting our money and failing our kids—and what we can do about it* (Hacker & Dreifus, 2010), *Academic adrift: Limited learning on college campuses* (Arum & Roksa, 2011), and *One-party classroom: How radical professors at America's top colleges indoctrinate students and undermine our democracy* (Horowitz & Laksin, 2009).

Generally, the authors demonstrate that often students are short-changed by indifferent instruction, huge classes, run-away grade inflation, ideological indoctrination, political correctness, and the dumbing down of the curriculum. Increasingly, student leaders are demanding that something be done to ameliorate poor teaching of undergraduate courses (see Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2010). In fact, some students have argued that teaching should be evaluated using reliable and valid institution-wide course evaluations, and that professors should be rewarded for teaching well and punished for teaching poorly (see, for example, Hira & Cohen, 2011; Vedder, 2004).

Increasing demands by student leaders are now forcing university administrators to pay much more attention to the quality of undergraduate teaching (Hira & Cohen, 2011; Oworm, 2012). Most Canadian universities have established special centres that offer workshops and short courses to professors for the purpose of improving their teaching skills, and nearly all reward a few of their most outstanding teachers. Most universities also have been using standardized teaching assessments and publishing the results, but they have not been rewarding good undergraduate teachers and, more importantly, punishing bad teachers. Some professors, of course, say that students are incapable of assessing good teaching, but this is a self-serving claim that contradicts the research literature (see, for example, Marsh & Roche, 1997; McKeachie, 1997). In fact, the literature shows that undergraduate students can distinguish "snakeoil peddlers" from truly good teachers.

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Although there may be value in publishing teaching evaluations, rewarding a few super-teachers, and establishing teacher-training services these have little or no effect on raising the general quality of undergraduate instruction. Rating classroom instruction may make teaching more transparent, but it hardly makes it more accountable because such ratings do not, by themselves, translate automatically into improved teaching performances. Likewise, rewarding a few star teachers has no obvious effect on the instructional proficiency of the vast majority of professors, some of whom say privately that they would be humiliated to be recognized as being excellent undergraduate teachers. Teaching centres also have limited value because poor teachers are almost never forced to attend courses, and there is rarely any follow-up to ensure that their teaching has improved. If these interventions have not resulted in significant improvements in undergraduate teaching, what more can be done?

## A performance-based system

Though institution-wide teaching evaluations are reliable and valid—irrespective of what some professors claim—their primary purpose is to provide information to instructors about their own teaching and to help students with their course/instructor selection. Even in the absence of published evaluations, where two professors are teaching different sections of the same course and one is a good teacher and the other is a poor teacher, it is evident that students try to enroll in—or switch to—the good teacher’s section based on information they have received via the rumor mill and/or their own disappointment after attending a few lectures in a poor teacher’s course. When students are blocked from enrolling in a preferred section by course ceilings or timetabling conflicts, they often drop out of the course.

As a consequence, a course that is taught by a good professor increases in size, adding to the professor’s work-load, while a course taught by a poor professor decreases in size along with that professor’s workload. By publishing the evaluations of professors, but doing nothing else, universities have institutionalized a system in which good professors actually are punished for teaching well, while poor professors are rewarded for teaching badly. Unfortunately, this perverse incentive system has become standard practice in Canadian universities. As a result, it is important to ask: how can university administrators use course evaluation data to establish a system that will reward good professors and good teaching departments?

To establish a performance-based reward system, one can use the ideas that are the basic theoretical propositions underpinning cooperative learning and team-based management (see Ephross & Vassil, 2005; Ladd, 1996; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003). I will illustrate with a hypothetical case the application of these ideas. Let us assume that the evaluation of professors ranges from a low of 1 to a high of 10 on a reliable and valid course evaluation instrument that can, in fact, distinguish “snakeoil peddlers” from good teachers. Now, suppose that the average teaching scores are calculated for each department and that these scores are weighted differentially based on the number of students enrolled in the various courses taught by all teachers within the department. Courses with more students would have higher weights than courses with fewer students. Now, assume that 20 percent of the departments in a university have average teaching scores above 7 and 20 percent have average scores below 4. Next, assume that departments with an average teaching score above level 7 are given credits for additional resources—more professional development money, better classrooms, increased academic and other positions, etc.—while departments below this cut-off level would not

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receive credits. In turn, departments with scores below level 4 would lose credits. In other words, over a number of years there would be a transfer of resources from departments with poor teachers to departments with good teachers.

Under this performance-based reward system, departments would be judged on readily available, reliable, valid, and easily interpretable data. As a result, decisions by senior administrators to allocate resources to faculties and departments would naturally be more transparent to students and to taxpayers. Moreover, students, taxpayers, and administrators would perceive this system to be more fair to faculty members within all departments, whether rewarded or not, because there would be real consequences—positive and negative—for professors and their departments. In other words, departments would be rewarded—in money, positions, etc.—for maintaining high average teaching performances and for increasing their average teaching performances. Conversely, by losing credits for added resources, departments and their professors would be penalized for having low average teaching performances and for allowing their performances to drop below a certain level. Obviously, university professors are thoughtful people and they still may be able to game the system to suite their interests, making it imperative for administrators to be vigilant in anticipating such an outcome.

The literature on performance-based reward systems suggests that incentives be provided to encourage departmental faculty members to work cooperatively to improve their average teaching performances (Ephross & Vassil, 2005; Ladd, 1996). For example, fewer departmental administrators would put their worst teachers in large first-year classes, as often occurs now; likewise, department members would encourage their “worst” colleagues to improve their performances, which now occurs rarely. At present, indifference among colleagues with regard to teaching performance occurs because there are virtually no incentives for good teachers to help poor teachers to improve. As such, good teachers are often dissatisfied because, while they have increasing numbers of students, some of whom are weak and need extra assistance, poor teachers in their departments can get away with teaching relatively few students.

More simply, each member of a department would have an incentive to consider carefully the teaching responsibilities of graduate students, part-time professors, sessional instructors, and newly-hired professors. If, for example, a department hired a poor teacher and the average teaching performance dropped below the highest cut-off level (level 7), the department would not receive additional resources the next year, but if the newly hired professor caused the average teaching performance to increase above the highest cut-off level (level 7), the department would be rewarded. Consequently, departments

would do a number of things, such as establishing mentoring programs for new faculty members to improve their teaching skills.

The performance-based reward system will be more effective if it is combined with at least two other policies. First, universities will need to adjust their policies about students withdrawing from courses. Currently, Canadian universities allow students to withdraw from courses without academic penalty, often months after they have begun, and with only a proportionate financial loss. This means that students can register in courses, do little work, and withdraw a few weeks before the end, thus wasting their time, as well as that of their professors and of the other students. Leaving the voluntary withdrawal date to a few weeks before the end of classes encourages students to be irresponsible, something that credible universities should not do.

Students who are not serious can affect the performance of other students, especially if they are using student-centered, cooperative-learning, or if students are working as teams in laboratories. In many ways, these students can have a negative effect on the teaching performance of their professors, too. As a result, it would be an advantage for professors and for most students to encourage those who are going to withdraw to do so near the beginning of courses, perhaps after three weeks, rather than near the end of the term.

Second, it is important to prevent the best teachers in departments from breaking away to establish smaller departments with other good teachers. This could be accomplished by rewarding departments that have 20 or more full-time faculty members, which is a realistic size for effective organizations (Ephross & Vassil, 2005, 37-42). At present, about 25 percent of the teaching departments at the University of Manitoba—my home institution—have more than 20 professors, and about 45 percent have fewer than 11 professors (University of Manitoba, 2008, 118-125). A perusal of the calendars for other Canadian universities suggests a similar pattern.

Increasing the size of departments would mean that small departments would be organized into larger departments, which would bring dozens of administrators back into classrooms. In turn, large classes could be decrease in size enhancing undergraduate teaching. Though the literature suggests that reducing class size may not improve the quality of teaching, smaller classes could improve out-of-class learning because instructors would be able to meet students individually and they would be able to assign more written work. Professors who give individual attention to greater numbers of students would likely receive stronger teaching evaluations, with the result that their departments would receive more performance-based rewards.

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# Conclusion

At present, it is implicit within Canadian universities and colleges that each professor is responsible for becoming a good teacher, without the benefit of formal teacher training, and the evaluation of teaching performance is at best perfunctory at most institutions. (Hira & Cohen, 2011; Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2010). Indeed, good teaching is generally devalued unless it is also supported by good research; rarely, if ever, is the reverse the case even though many collective agreements stipulate that teaching is as important as research (Owram, 2012). In this respect, Thomas Sowell (1993, 205) reports that a science professor at the University of Michigan reflected the sentiment of many Canadian university professors when he said: "Every minute I spend in an undergraduate classroom is costing me money and prestige." Critics of what passes for undergraduate teaching would agree that "there is now widespread contempt for undergraduate teaching among professors," largely because the academic rewards—promotion, status, and increments in salaries—are allocated for exceptional research, and not for exceptional teaching (Hacker & Dreifus, 2010, 78).

If more than lip service is to be paid to good undergraduate teaching, and if the interests of the fee-paying students are to be given their proper weight, universities must ensure that undergraduate students receive high quality teaching from faculty members. One way to do this is to encourage professors to help one another to become better teachers by instituting a meaningful and workable system of rewards based on their collective, departmental, teaching performances (see Ephross & Vassil, 2005; Ladd, 1996; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003).

As Canadian universities restructure to meet the demands of decreased financial resources, increased tuition fees, and higher societal expectations, they will need to pay more attention to undergraduate teaching. In the 1950s, the famous American psychologist Theodore Newcombe made an often quoted claim: "It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that the principal source of human waste ... lies in our failure to take advantage of group resources for increased individual motivation." Seen from this perspective, a departmental performance-based accountability system is more likely to enhance the quality of undergraduate teaching than the reward systems that are in place currently at Canadian universities, particularly those in place at research universities.



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