Simplify Grading

Get ready for NEA’s Degrees Not Debt Week of Action!

Take a side: The war on college remediation

Check out NEA’s new calls for papers

Can civility and academic freedom coexist?
NEA urges fix to Parent Plus loans and remedy for HBCU students

Two out of three HBCU students who applied to use federal Parent Plus loans to help pay for college were denied loans in 2012, thanks to restrictions that the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) put into place in 2011. By 2013, according to the United Negro College Fund, the number of students attending HBCUs with PLUS loans had fallen 45 percent—or more than 17,000 students. “These are precisely the students we most need to provide the assistance they need to ensure access to and success in higher education,” wrote NEA Education Policy and Practice director Donna Harris-Aikens to DOE officials in September. Half of HBCU students come from households where the household income is less than $34,000, and several HBCUs have closed in recent years because of financial struggles. “Our top two priorities for higher education are to increase access and affordability, while working to reduce student debt,” Harris-Aikens wrote. To help achieve these goals, she added, NEA’s Degrees Not Debt campaign is working hard for more need-based aid, as well as expanded loan forgiveness programs for public service workers.

NEW Thought & Action calls for papers

The NEA Thought & Action Journal, a peer-reviewed journal of higher education, has issued two calls for papers in 2015. The first asks authors to consider the topic of “Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice,” while the second asks, “What is the purpose of higher education?” Manuscripts on other matters of higher education, including the art of teaching, contingent labor, unionism, and more, are always welcome as well. Poetry is accepted, as is visual art. Deadlines are January 15, 2015, and April 15, 2015, for publication in spring and fall 2015. To read the calls in their entirety, and check out the journal’s guidelines around submission, visit nea.org/thoughtandaction.

Save the date! NEA Higher Ed to meet in Florida this spring

The NEA Higher Ed Conference will be March 13 to 15, with a Leadership Day on March 12, at the Walt Disney Swan and Dolphin Resort in Orlando. Registration will be available in December at nea.org/he.
In states across the U.S., including Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, and Connecticut, state lawmakers think they have the answer for students who need extra time and support when they get to college. Take it away. These policymakers have promoted the idea that developmental or remedial education — those extra reading and math classes that students must take when they fail college-readiness exams — is failing, and that somehow its removal will make less successful students more successful. Educators agree it is the wrong answer.
Gene Brown isn't the only first-year college student who has needed extra help to meet the demands of a college curriculum. About 20 percent of first-year college students enrolled in non-credit developmental reading and/or math courses in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Within “open admission” four-year public institutions, the average rate was 25.6 percent, while at community colleges it was 24 percent.

While remediation rates vary among states and institutions, federal statistics also show it’s more likely for non-traditional college students, low-income students, and students of color to need extra support. For example, 30 percent of Black students and 29 percent of Hispanic students took developmental courses in 2008, as did 25 percent of students whose parents didn’t attend college.

Of course, as the nation becomes more diverse, these are exactly the students that we must educate to meet the demands of the modern workplace, notes NEAs Mark F. Smith, senior policy analyst. “Students enter higher education from a wide variety of experiences, and many will need these programs regardless of the quality of local elementary and secondary institutions,” said Smith. “Educators need to work to prepare students for success under all circumstances.”

The War on Remediation

Last year, Florida Gov. Rick Scott made remedial or developmental courses optional for any community college student who has recently earned a standard Florida high school diploma. And “optional” means most young adults likely will not receive that extra help or support, said Dianne Ruggerio, an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor at Broward College in south Florida.

Older students still must take a college readiness exam, but if they fail Florida colleges may no longer place them in stand-alone, non-credit developmental courses. Instead they’ll be encouraged to take an online “co-requisite” course in reading or math, at the same time that they take college-level algebra or English composition. (This despite much research showing that students who need the most support do worst in online developmental courses… and the fact that math is an aggressively cumulative subject. With gaps in knowledge, it becomes impossible for students to move forward, Brown pointed out.)

Many other states also have new restrictions: In Connecticut, a 2012 law limited students to a single semester of non-credit remedial work. In Colorado, a 2012 law ordered colleges to move students into “co-requisite” classes. And, in Tennessee, a 2010 law eliminated developmental education from four-year public colleges, and new programs also have encouraged high-school students to take remedial math online, before they get to college.

Meanwhile, Ohio, West Virginia, and several other states also have new limits on remedial education.

The experts at the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) are not unaware of this trend. Some of these new initiatives may be based on research and hold promise for improving the progress of underperforming students, NADE notes, while others are poorly conceived, poorly initiated, and not at all related to sound research or policy principles. “These will not only fail to improve student progress but may also contribute to unanticipated negative outcomes, particularly for minorities and the poor,” wrote Hunter

hen Susan Williams Brown’s husband lost his job as a steel worker 23 years after leaving high school, he returned to college to learn new skills for today’s workplace. “Needless to say, he did not remember his 9th-grade algebra,” said Williams Brown, chair of Gadsden State Community College’s math division. “He did have to take a remedial algebra class to refresh his math skills.” But Gene Brown’s success in that developmental math course led to his earning his Associate’s degree, and that degree led to a new job.

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Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education.

“This is all generated by state legislators — they look at the dollars and say we’re spending too much,” said Ruggiero. “But they don’t talk to educators or the people who are actually teaching the class, and they don’t consider the students who may be moving at their own pace.”

In July, Brown and Ruggiero brought the issue to an attentive NEA Representative Assembly: “These courses are a vital link to a college education,” Brown told NEA delegates, who voted to support adequate funding of remedial and developmental education and raise awareness of the issues.

Moving Forward

Meanwhile, opponents of remediation, led by a political advocacy group called College Completion America, call it a tar pit where students’ dreams get stuck and die. Too few students go on from remediation to graduate, they say. But it’s true that most institutions’ graduation rates can, and must, be improved. But a 2006 study showed that students who take remediation courses are more likely to graduate than equivalent students who don’t take those courses.

In any case, “channeling unprepared students into college coursework without providing them with an academic safety net is no formula for higher completion rates,” pointed out William Tierney, University of Southern California professor, in a recent Inside Higher Ed editorial. In fact, simply shutting down programs will likely harm the students who most need help, he suggested.

Before rushing into ill-advised “reform,” NADE suggests that trained professionals identify what works, that states pilot innovations before mandating them, and that everybody recognize that there are no simple solutions.

NEA agrees: Noting the growing divide between rich and poor in the U.S., and the “erosion of opportunities” for access to higher education, NEA’s policy brief on remediation in higher education calls on K-12 and higher education to coordinate curriculum. It also calls on colleges to task teaching personnel (key word: teaching personnel!) with the development, implementation, and evaluation of remediation programs. Also, importantly, those programs should be fully funded and staffed by faculty with expertise in developmental education.

Students need “meaningful access and support” to reach graduation and enter the workforce, according to NEA—and plenty of public colleges are doing it right. For example, at Iowa Lakes Community College (ILCC), which won NADE certification last year, students in developmental reading “made almost two grade levels of improvement in one semester—basically from a 9th grade reading level to an 11th grade level,” reported ILCC’s Success Center professor Lynn Dodge.

At New York’s Kingsborough Community College, which Tierney praised for its “learning communities,” low-scoring students in those learning communities are taking and passing more college courses. And, last year, Excelencia in Education honored NEA Higher Ed members at LaGuardia Community College, also in New York, for their success in supporting non-traditional, immigrant students with individualized social-work services. “They come here because they’re hoping to have a better life and often they see education as the door to a better life,” said David Housel, an assistant director at LaGuardia, who coordinates the support of social workers for students. “They know you need a degree or a certificate to get a job. They understand that... But sometimes they need support to fulfill those motivations.”

BY MARY ELLEN FLANNERY
Editor, NEA Higher Education Advocate
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WHO NEEDS REMEDIATION?
AVERAGE REMEDIATION RATES VARY, DEPENDING ON THE TYPE OF INSTITUTION, THE FIELD OF STUDY, AND STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS, ACCORDING TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION’S NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS.
The above percentages are based on 2008 data.
A Better Way to Grade

Our current grading system is broken. It doesn’t work well for faculty, students, post-secondary institutions, or prospective employers of our graduates. Consider this alternative system that restores rigor, motivates students, and saves you grading time.

Grading is often the least favorite part of faculty’s job, and as course loads and class sizes grow, it takes more and more of our time. Decisions around partial credit, which students expect for any vaguely correct statement, and justifications for point deductions, can take considerable hours for us to make.

And still, students complain. They’re stressed out, too—and also pressured to play the “college game,” which rewards those who snag the best grades with the least possible investment of time and effort.

At the same time, our colleges and universities put little stock in our grades because they don’t always translate into outcomes achieved. Do A’s really certify that students achieved all course outcomes at a high level of competency? Do B’s, C’s, and D’s imply achievement of some outcomes and not others? If so, why are students passing? As faculty, we know a passing grade doesn’t guarantee competency in any of our outcomes. But if we failed students for not demonstrating competency in all of our outcomes, we would get into trouble with the very administrators who discredit our grades.

Meanwhile, for employers, grades only weakly predict on-the-job success. In fact, grades and academic test scores explain only 2.4 percent of the variance in career success.

There must be—and there is—a better way to grade. Let me describe a new system, called specifications or “specs” grading, in three parts.
that formula or whatever part of the formula is important for your students to learn and follow. The specs should also require that the work be submitted on time.

With that in mind, using “specs” grading, complete, satisfactory, on-time work either receives all the possible points or counts towards the course grade, while incomplete, unsatisfactory, or late work receives no points or credit and may be returned for revision. For the students, it's all or nothing—no sliding by, no blowing off the directions, and no betting on partial credit for sloppy, last-minute work.

At least a couple of dozen faculty have tried pass/fail grading of assignments and tests (see references and Nilson, 2015), and all who have shared their results report that this type of grading increases student motivation and produces higher-quality student work.

**Tokens**

How about adding some flexibility to the system while also rewarding wise planning, promptness, and quality? Students start the term with one, two, or three tokens that they can exchange for a 24-hour deadline extension or the chance to revise unsatisfactory work, take a make-up exam, or be absent or late to class without penalty. You might also allow them to earn tokens by submitting satisfactory work early, doing an additional assignment, having perfect attendance, or doing truly outstanding work.

Of course, students who consistently submit work on time, submit satisfactory work the first time, attend class regularly, and arrive on time will not have to use their tokens. At the end of the course, you might let them exchange some number of their tokens for dropping their lowest-graded quiz, skipping the final exam, or getting some other coveted reward.

**“FOR STUDENTS, IT’S ALL OR NOTHING — NO SLIDING BY, NO BLOWING OFF THE DIRECTIONS, NO BETTING ON PARTIAL CREDIT.”**

**Bundles**

Add one more element to pass/fail grading and the token system: the student’s freedom to choose among bundles of specs-graded assignments and tests, each bundle associated with a different final grade. Higher course grades require completing more and/or more challenging work, and each assignment or test must pass the specs requirement in order to count. So students decide the amount of time and effort they will put into a class, depending upon the grade they want. However, we should encourage our students, especially first-generation college students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to aim for the A.

Examine your current assignments and tests, including papers, reflections, problem sets, programs, and designs. Try grouping them into three, four, or even ten bundles, some not very challenging, some very challenging, and some in the middle. Number each bundle so that the lower numbers designate easier work, while the higher numbers designate more demanding and higher-level thinking work, such as those involving evaluation and creation. Then associate the bundles with course grades, perhaps like this:

- For a D, students have to complete Bundles 1, 2, and 3.
- For a C, they have to complete Bundles 1 through 5.
- For a B, they have to complete Bundles 1 through 8.
- And for an A, all ten bundles.

Here is another model that links each bundle to the outcomes achieved by completing it:

- For a D (or F), students fail to complete Bundle 1.
- For a C, they complete Bundle 1, which is averaging 70 percent or higher across objective exams that require and demonstrate knowl-

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**BEST PRACTICES > MORE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND HIGHER LEVELS OF THINKING**

When Dr. Kathleen Kegley taught plant medicine at Clemson University, she designed bundles to reward students for mastering more content—specifically, knowledge of the physiology, pathologies, and treatment strategies for more plants. Students earned a C for averaging 70 percent or higher across the objective exams, which assessed their abilities to grossly classify plants, pathologies, and treatments. For a B, students had to meet the C requirement and complete assignments that went into more detail on six different plants. For an A, students had to meet the B requirements and complete assignments on six more plants, for a total of twelve. In other words, they had to master more material, but all at the same cognitive level, to attain a higher grade.

At Western Illinois University, Dr. Laurence L. Leff offers his computer science students a range of assignments of varying difficulty. For a C, students must do only the easiest six assignments. For a B, they must do the intermediate six assignments. And for an A, they must do the most difficult six assignments. Note: Students complete the same number of assignments no matter which grade they are aiming for. Those who want an A do not carry a heavier workload, although more challenging work may take more time.
When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first satellite in space, in 1957, suddenly Americans were enamored with science, math, technology, and educating the next generation for global competition. Pushed and generously funded by the government, our academic institutions went from “good” to among the best in the world.

I was part of the “Sputnik generation” that faced considerable pressure to master a packed curriculum. If we failed, we faced consequences, possibly repeating a grade. Conversely, if we excelled in school or academic competitions, we received awards. But only the best received them. The education was rigorous, and we were challenged and motivated to learn and achieve.

Maybe the system was elitist and several other “ists.” But since then, in our effort to educate a broader, more diverse population, we have abandoned rigor and the motivation it inspires. Our international test scores and rankings have plummeted, grade inflation has raged, and this sad decline has generated exposés like Academically Adrift and The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way.

We did not have to give up rigor and the drive to achieve, and I propose bringing them back with a new grading system. For the sake of our students, we can do this!
that formula or whatever part of the formula is important for your students to learn and follow. The specs should also require that the work be submitted on time.

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• For a B, they complete Bundle 1 and Bundle 2, which requires and demonstrates application and analysis of the material (e.g., solving problems that entail choices among different possible approaches or algorithms or writing a paper on how a real-life situation or event exemplifies a certain concept or phenomenon).

• For an A, they complete Bundles 1, 2 and also 3, which requires and demonstrates synthesis and evaluation of the material (e.g., writing a paper that integrates course material and outside research to develop solutions to a “fuzzy” problem and assess each alternative).

An Overall Evaluation
In the specs grading system, our grades reflect the outcomes students have and have not achieved. Because we set the passing bar high, we uphold rigor and motivate students to do their best. Their ability to choose their course grade is also motivating, minimizes their conflicts with us, and makes them feel more responsible for their grades. As long as our specs are clear—and this is our biggest challenge as faculty—student know what is expected of them, which lowers their anxiety.

Tokens also reduce stress and remove at least some uncomfortable interactions we often have with students, like requests for extensions and other special treatment. While specs grading permits extensions, students do pay for them in the end.

Also, importantly, specs grading saves us time. First, it probably takes less time to write one set of clear specs than it does to write a four- or five-level rubric. Then our actual grading involves only looking for specific features in a student’s work, which either has them all or doesn’t. No more hair-splitting decisions about partial credit or justifications for not giving all the possible points. Second, bundling can help streamline the task of tracking many different tests and assignments. And, third, dealing with fewer grading complaints will also save us time.

Once we determine whether an assignment passes, students may actually see our feedback as well-intended expert advice worth heeding. After all, we are giving it freely, not to justify our subtracting points. With feedback and evaluation disconnected, we become more of a coach than a critic.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES


How many chances for revising unsatisfactory work should students get?
Just one or two—otherwise, you’ll have to grade too much work twice, thus increasing your workload. Consider restricting token use for revisions.

What if a student submits an unacceptable paper as part of a bundle and doesn’t have a token for a chance to revise it?
Then she will get a lower course grade than she was aiming for. In the direst circumstances, you must be willing to let students fail themselves.

Why not just stick with the point system and forget bundles?
You can retain your point-based system and grade student work on an all-points-or-no-points basis. However, to give students any choice and control, you have to design many more than, let’s say, 100 points worth of assignments and tests. Furthermore, point totals do not map onto outcomes. A total of 78 points earned out of 100 says nothing about what a student is or is not able to do.

Is adopting specs grading an all-or-nothing proposition?
Not at all. The token system fits into any course, and, as just explained, you can incorporate pass/fail grading into a point-based system. If using bundles, you can specs grade only certain work—that required for an A, or for an A or a B, or for a C or a D—and traditionally grade the rest. Within a point-based system, you can specs grade just one or two assignments or certain homework or test items, such as short-answer questions, short essays, or extra-credit problems. Finally, if using a rubric, you can specs grade the student product on each criterion.
UNION POWER

Congratulations to the 2015 Aspen Prize finalists

Two Texas colleges with strong Texas Faculty Association (TFA) chapters have been named finalists for the 2015 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, a national award for high achievement in U.S. community colleges. This is the first time that El Paso Community College has been named to the list of 10 Aspen finalists, and the second for Brazosport College, which also was a finalist in 2013. To identify finalists, Aspen's selection committee reviews extensive data from more than 1,500 U.S. colleges with an eye to achievement in four areas: learning, degree completion, post-graduation employment, and success for minority and low-income students. It should be no surprise that the data led directly to the two Texas community college with strong faculty unions, said Sasha Tarrant, Brazosport history professor and union leader. “I truly believe that empowered faculty make for stronger institutions,” said Tarrant. At Brazosport, the union has achieved a strong voice in campus decisions by aligning TFA leadership with Faculty Senate leadership so that faculty can speak with one voice. Major committees have at least one faculty voice, and a small group of faculty leaders meets regular with the college president. “We feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, which I truly believe has contributed to better decision-making,” Tarrant said. Tarrant also noted that the union has insisted Brazosport stick to its commitment around hiring tenure-track instructors, and Brazosport currently has a smaller percentage of contingent faculty than many similar institutions. “We know we can make a difference with our collective voice,” she said. Other finalists with NEA Higher Ed members include: Eugenio María de Hostos Community College, CUNY, NY; Kennedy-King College of the City Colleges of Chicago, IL; Lake Area Technical College, SD, and Olympic College, WA.

Robert White
ALABAMA STATE UNIVERSITY

The challenges facing faculty and staff at the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUS) are growing. Faced with declining enrollment and rising infrastructure costs, several HBCUs have been forced to cease operations in recent years. But, despite the grim forecast, unionized HBCU faculty and staff see bright days ahead for their institutions and students. According to the newly elected president of Alabama State University-NEA, Robert White, an instructor of English and humanities, unions can help HBCUs meet their current challenges by helping members organize, helping colleges secure funds, and by building institutional stability through the use of faculty as a tool and resource. “There’s not an issue that a university can’t face that the faculty can’t solve,” said White. Through their union, White added, faculty and staff can participate in shared governance, the academic tradition of power-sharing between faculty and administration, and they also have a means to properly protect their rights as workers. And, through their union, faculty and staff also get an equal say in important decisions—not just around pay and equity, but also around all the other things that add up to an institution’s mission and integrity. “The faculty and the staff have a greater effectiveness in helping the institution be what it’s supposed to be,” White said.

By Luke Towler
Four Ways to Join NEA’s Degrees Not Debt Week of Action

By the Numbers

NEA’s Degrees Not Debt Week of Action kicks off November 10th. If you believe every American deserves a fair shot at a higher education, this is your chance to do something about the student debt crisis. With total student debt in the U.S. topping $1.2 trillion, and seven out of 10 college graduates owing an average of $30,000 each, student debt isn’t just a burden anymore—it’s become a barrier to the American Dream.

Take the pledge.

It only takes a few minutes to raise your hand for college affordability.

SIGN NEA’S DEGREES NOT DEBT PLEDGE AT NEA.ORG/DEGREESNOTDEBT.

You’ll join a network of educators and students who are standing up for college affordability.

Spread the word.

SOCIAL MEDIA is a great way to build awareness among your friends and family members. You’ll find a library of NEA’s Degrees Not Debt memes at NEA.ORG/DEGREESNOTDEBT that you can post to Facebook or Twitter.

Host an event!

TWO IDEAS: Host or attend an NEA’s Degrees Not Debt INFO SESSION on your campus and help people in your community learn about loan repayment options, or...

Host or attend a SCREENING of the documentary film, Ivory Tower, and invite post-film discussion around the issues. (Watch the trailer and download the movie at www.takepart.com/ivorytower.)

Register or find an event at NEA’s Degrees Not Debt online network here: ACTIONNETWORK.ORG/EVENT_CAMPAIGNS/DEGREES-NOT-DEBT, and we’ll reach out to help support your event.

Sponsor a Faculty Senate or Assembly resolution.

WHEREAS, Pell Grants don’t even cover 40 percent of college costs today, and WHEREAS, the average cost of tuition at a public college increased 4.8 percent this year alone...

BE IT RESOLVED that your Senate supports NEA’s Degrees Not Debt campaign. Full language for a sample resolution also is available at NEA.ORG/DEGREESNOTDEBT.
Illinois unions win furlough fight worth $1.9 million!

An administrative law judge for the Illinois Education Labor Relations Board (IELRB) has found that Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) acted illegally during a 2011 contract dispute and has ordered SIUC to return $1.9 million in lost salary to more than 1,500 current and former employees whose pay was illegally cut. “This decision represents a victory not only for the unions that filed the unfair labor practice charge and the employees they represent, but also for the principles and practice of good faith collective bargaining,” said SIUC Faculty Association President Rachel Stocking. In her ruling, Judge Colleen Harvey found that the former administration at SIU bargained in bad faith and illegally pushed “to the point of impasse” three unions affiliated with the Illinois Education Association, “…simply so [administration] could impose its offer on the bargaining unit(s).” Their conduct “demonstrated that it lacked an open mind and a sincere desire to reach agreement.” The university has been instructed to repay salary that it illegally withheld from faculty and staff over four furlough days in 2011. The university can appeal the ruling, but, under state law, the amount owed the employees will accrue interest during appeal. “This is compensation that had already been legally negotiated into our contract,” said James Wall, president of the Non-Tenure Track Faculty Association. “The imposition of four furlough days was the equivalent to a roughly 2 percent salary reduction give-back.”

Lakeland faculty win contract that also benefits students

The full-time faculty at Lakeland Community College in Ohio settled a three-year contract this fall, but not until they were hours from striking. “Two things saved us from striking — and neither was the administration,” said faculty union president Michelle Long. For one thing, the union was incredibly unified, “like I’ve never seen before in my 27 years,” said Long. For another, despite a hard press by administrators, Lakeland’s contingent faculty refused to cross a picket line to teach their classes or the classes of their full-time colleagues. “These adjuncts really made an enormous difference, and we appreciated it very much,” said Long. Administrators had been pressing for take-backs around pay and benefits, but the faculty won small raises in the second two years of the three-year contract. More importantly, faculty also insisted on the establishment of a new safety committee to focus on making Lakeland’s campus a safer place for students and faculty. The new contract also creates a small professional development fund for faculty—to help them learn more in their fields and serve students as best as they can. “We tried to press for what would be good for the college as a whole,” said Long.

Hundreds protect take-backs at UMass Amherst

More than 300 UMass Amherst staff, faculty, students, and allies from other local unions and advocacy groups, like Jobs With Justice, rallied in September to support the three campus unions affiliated with the Massachusetts Teachers Association. All three are bargaining new contracts, and the university’s administration has threatened to take back recent pay raises and cut benefits, including vacation and sick time. But if the university cared about savings, it could find plenty of waste to cut, including administrative bloat, suggested Donna Johnson, president of the 1,000-member University Staff Union.

Robert Greenwald


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consonant with research on learning and motivation. A practical, time-saving, student-motivating system of grading. A major advance in our thinking about how we grade and how students learn.”
—BARBARA WALVOORD, Professor Emerita, University of Notre Dame

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—LINDA B. NILSON
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The Civility Battle

Does “civility” really mean censorship?

BY JASON WALTA

Civility. Who could argue with that? Most of us regard it as a common courtesy. And, its virtues have been extolled by figures ranging from John F. Kennedy (“Civility is not a sign of weakness”) to Mary Wortley Montagu (“Civility costs nothing, and buys everything”).

Yet, university campuses recently have become consumed with heated debate over whether “civility” has become a stalking horse for censoring controversial speech and stifling academic freedom.

At the center of this maelstrom is the case of Steven Salaita, a scholar of American Indian studies who was set to assume a tenured teaching position at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign earlier this year. His appointment was proceeding apace. Indeed, Salaita had already quit his job at Virginia Tech and moved to Illinois in anticipation of beginning his new duties. In August, however, Salaita was suddenly informed that the university’s chancellor would not approve his appointment—a step that is usually little more than a formality after an offer such as Salaita’s has already been accepted.

The chancellor, Phyllis Wise, made no bones about why she rescinded Salaita’s job offer. She pointed to a series of statements Salaita had posted on Twitter over the summer, in the midst of escalating military actions by Israel in Gaza. Salaita’s posts were harsh, provocative, and sometimes laced with profanity. For example, after three young Israelis were kidnapped and killed in June, Salaita wrote, “You may be too refined to say it, but I’m not: I wish all the [expletive] West Bank settlers would go missing.” Chancellor Wise, in a statement explaining her decision, said that she had revoked the job offer because it was her “responsibility to ensure that . . . differing points of view [are] discussed in and outside the classroom in a scholarly, civil and productive manner.”

The outcry against Chancellor Wise’s decision — and, in particular, against her explanation for that decision — was powerful and immediate. Within the university, the faculty in several departments voted no confidence in Wise’s leadership. And outside the university, several professional associations (including the American Association of University Professors and Modern Language Association) condemned the action as contrary to basic principles of academic freedom, while countless scholars from other institutions have joined a boycott against the university.

Few would disagree that civility plays an important role in higher education. At a minimum, faculty have an obligation to foster classroom conditions where students, in their search for knowledge, are able to ask questions and venture opinions without fear of punishment or ridicule by the instructor. Otherwise, the very goal of educating students would be jeopardized.

But how should that duty of civility be enforced? How far beyond the classroom can it be extended? And how much consideration should be given to the potentially countervailing concerns of academic freedom?

In all of these respects, the Salaita case is an ominous one. For starters, policing “civility” in faculty member’s public statements is a highly subjective undertaking that invites abuse. And, even if the university were justified in taking some corrective action against Salaita for his “uncivil” speech, it seems vastly disproportionate to revoke an offer of tenure that Salaita had already accepted and relied upon.

In addition, Wise’s claim that “civility” may be enforced both “inside and outside of the classroom” suggests a view that faculty must, a consequence of accepting a job, forfeit some of their most basic rights as citizens. But when a public university punishes an employee for statements made in his personal capacity as a citizen, speaking on significant matters of public concern, grave First Amendment issues arise. While the courts have whittled away many of the constitutional protections of public employees in the past few years, the university’s actions still would be difficult to defend if Salaita decides to challenge them in court.

Finally, while the interests of students are surely served to some degree by having a classroom where civility reigns, it is equally important to recognize that their education will be more sterile and less challenging if their instructors live in fear of saying the wrong thing either in the classroom or in public. If academic freedom is to be a virtue at all, it is because it empowers faculty to push boundaries — particularly on sensitive or controversial issues — so that students might benefit.
NEA’s Degrees Not Debt, a Campaign of Hope

AFTER GRADUATING more than three decades ago, I returned in 2011 as an adjunct English professor to my alma mater, Rosary College, now Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. It was a humbling experience. Many of the nuns, whom I revered, became my colleagues and friends. Most importantly, I, the once rambunctious freshmen, was now entrusted to educate and help shape inquiring young minds.

My first semester went extremely well; all of my 40-plus students successfully passed my English 101 and 102 classes and went on to enjoy illustrious educational careers and promising futures — or so I thought.

The truth came crashing down on me one summer when I walked into my local McDonald’s and an all too familiar voice said to me, “Welcome to McDonald’s, Ms. Ragsdell. Can I help you?”

There, standing before me in her crew uniform, was one of my best and most talented students. I stood paralyzed for a moment before I asked her how she was doing and, of course, also asked, “How is school?”

“Oh, I quit school,” she said, her sad eyes betraying her bright smile. “I couldn’t afford it any more.” I said, “Oh?” “Yeah, the tuition is more than $30,000, and my family can’t afford that, and I don’t want to get a loan because I don’t want to be in debt when I finish,” she added.

Shocked, I remembered when I attended Rosary, tuition including room and board was less than $5,000 a year.

I paid for my meal, and as I looked into her eyes, I said, “Maria, promise me you will go back.” She quietly said, “I will, next year.” That was more than two years ago, and when I visit my local McDonald’s, I still see her. Now she is the shift manager, and she earns about $11 an hour. She always promises she is going back.

Last week, I made a special trip to that McDonald’s, and I handed her a resource brochure from NEA’s Degrees Not Debt campaign. I briefly explained some of the federal programs that NEA’s Degrees Not Debt is working to raise awareness of, including public service loan forgiveness, federal income-based loan repayment, and federal TEACH grants for future teachers. These are programs that could help her manage her future student debt. I also encouraged her to learn more online and to take NEA’s Degrees Not Debt pledge (nea.org/degreesnotdebt).

More importantly, knowing her aspiration is to become a teacher, I encouraged her to return to school and to “take the money” (i.e., the loan) because at least now, there is hope at the end of the tunnel.

Loretta Ragsdell is director at large of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), and also teaches English as an adjunct instructor at the City Colleges of Chicago.