

'A' for effort

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I once thought that I could never be a college student. I am evolutionarily challenged; I do not speak very clearly (though I do not drool); and without an opposing thumb, my typing skills leave a great deal to be desired. Yet three unrelated events make me see that not only should I enroll, I should get top grades on the basis of my motivation, drive, and desire to work.

In the first instance, a marketing teacher told me of his late-night calls from the mother of a student who failed his class. Although the caller's daughter was seldom absent, she exhibited the cognitive activity of a beanie baby. When called upon for class discussion, she just stared at the teacher. For most exams, she turned in a blank paper, as she did for most questions on the comprehensive final. Yet the mother argued that the "F" grade would force an additional term of work for graduation, something the family could not afford. "I am a teacher, too," she said, "and I know that you must sometimes give a passing grade for the effort and not just for what the student does." Of course, universities recognize that faculty sometimes do this and have a name for it: capricious grading.

More recently, news media attention to military and basic training reported that the physical tests for women were weaker than those for men. A base commander told the interviewer that "You must understand that the women's effort to meet their different standards is the same as the effort required for the men to meet theirs." I had previously thought that standards meant a measure of needed performance, or else the standards were meaningless.

The third but older story drove it home. Last year, a high school swimming star was falling short of the National Collegiate Athletic Association policies for academic eligibility and could not compete during his first year of college. His highly publicized response was to assert that the rules should not apply to him because he is learning disabled, in effect claiming high school course credit for work he did not do.

At the same time, a gymnastics champion had similar concerns about a disability that "limits my long-term memory." No one mentioned that such a problem should raise doubts as to whether she carried enough background from high school to do college work.

In all these stories, people are asking for an "A for effort." Regardless of performance, they wanted the credits or grades because of who they were or how hard they tried. It is no different than raising scores because a person is good looking, and it implies that a motivated student acquires the learning experience necessary for future success by contagion, regardless of performance.

By this standard, I should be considered a top student: I prove my drive and motivation when I chase tennis balls in Alabama in August. But I am not so chromosomally limited and follicly overendowed to have my mind clouded by the delusion that I should get course credit for it.

In general, three factors account for a student's success in higher education: innate ability, the basic tools or background to handle the material, and motivation. Sometimes extra output in one area can compensate for weaknesses or limitations in another. It is totally acceptable to give a learning-disabled person help so that he or she can learn the material. It may take extra effort, but it is no different than a lecturer using a special microphone that directly feeds the hearing-impaired person's hearing aid, or finding a textbook reader for a visually impaired student.

It is another matter completely, however, to assert that because persons are different or disabled they should get credit for what they did not do. Some people just can't handle higher education. Standards mean that work has been done.

Unfortunately, faculty see students they know are not disabled "faking it" to get a diagnosis, which, in the students' opinions, gives them a competitive edge "in case they need it." A student advisor states that able-bodied men and women are asking how to "get into the disability program" (apparently without evidence of any real disability) so they could get first pick on class schedules.

Change magazine briefly noted the (supposedly) true story of a student who told his teacher he had a disability. When asked what it was, he said, "I'm not sure [but] I seem to have trouble thinking." As one athletic department counselor told my friend, many of her charges have the "learning disability" of being academically lazy. As soon as the ACT test rules said that learning-disabled students could take the test without a time limit, there was a sudden increase in students claiming the disability. A friend showed me a notification on a student in his class who needed oral exams because of difficulty reading and writing responses, and that the student "prefers" multiple-choice exams because he has difficulty expressing himself. We all wonder what such a student would have learned in four years of college. The more sarcastic among us note that this means illiteracy is now a learning disability.

No one wants to prevent any disabled person from acquiring an academic experience. But in school, course credit and a grade represent learning, requiring the ability to read and write and express ideas. ■