Kill the grading curve

By David Laude, June 17, 2014

Rich students usually graduate from college. Poor students usually don't.

That's the theory *The New York Times Magazine* put forward in a recent article that highlighted my efforts at the University of Texas at Austin to improve graduation rates among economically disadvantaged students by addressing the psychological obstacles they face.

What the article did not address directly is the underlying reason why many students don't graduate: the grading curve — the venerable measure that instructors use to separate the best students from the worst. End up too far to the left on the bell curve too often and your chances of graduating fall sharply. And historically, that has applied disproportionately to the disadvantaged.

The success of the strategies being developed at UT-Austin to help at-risk students raises another question about the curve: If more disadvantaged students are now passing, will instructors need to find other students to fail?

The idea of education as competition — in which instructors select for the best and in some cases forget the rest — often hurts students, especially freshmen, who are finding their footing. In fact, the first exams students take a month after starting college tell us what we already know: that a student with a high SAT score is less likely to fail than a student with a lower SAT score.

It is a vital mission of higher education institutions to identify the next Nobel laureate among our students. But that is only one of our responsibilities, and ranking students when they should still be on the practice field does little to identify the next laureate and, worse, potentially discards them before the game begins.

The good news is that innovations in technology and teaching are giving us better ways to educate our new students. I began to see this firsthand a few years ago and decided to stop using the grading curve I'd once embraced. These days, I walk into class on the first day of the semester and tell my 500 freshman chemistry students that every one of them can earn an A. Armed with clear expectations for my students and a more positive perspective on student success, I do everything I can to help them master the material. In the process, I have changed my course, which combines lectures and online instruction, to provide students with 24/7 access to the content they need. This gives me more time to motivate students and help them develop study skills. I also use a more flexible grading structure that incentivizes students to study harder rather than give up after that first exam.

I still have a long way to go, but I'm getting better. This spring, more than half of my students earned A's, twice as many as a decade ago. To those who are quick to argue grade inflation, I can assure you that my course material has only gotten more challenging through the years and that, more importantly, far more learning is occurring now than before.

As I make these improvements, I realize I have some serious competition in my effort to help students succeed. I see this new competition every time my children and their friends are playing video games, which familiarize our children with learning and adapting quickly in a low-stakes digital environment. Video games may sound antithetical to learning, but the ability to lose several times while steadily improving — without being locked out of the game — can be transferred to the classroom.

Online educators understand very well the potential of gamification — the use of game elements in everyday settings, like school and work — in breaking the grading curve. On campus, we need to understand that the traditional brick-and-mortar approach to teaching, despite all its advantages, puts physical and temporal constraints on student success.

In the coming years, I imagine that the most successful teaching models will effectively blend the best of what technology has to offer with the value that only comes with face-to-face learning. What should disappear in the process is the grading curve. New strategies will be needed for ranking our students and guiding them toward professional schools and into the workforce, but there will also be a lot more educated talent to spread around — and Texas will be better off because of it.

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