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Editor  
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To the Editor:

In regards your editorial of Saturday, May 13, 'Keeping College Customers Satisfied?', I'd like to offer a contrary opinion. The concern that 79% of grades of the Univ. of Ill at Champaign/Urbana were B- or higher implies an eroding of standards is based on the (dubious) assumption that the average grade in any class should be a C. I've taught college for almost 30 years now, and nothing gives me more pleasure in teaching than to have my class do really well. Good teaching, good students, the excitement of learning new things- why should a student who really knows her stuff be given a C, or, in a class of anal-retentive hot-shots (read pre-meds) even lower (if you're going to have a C average, there better be a fair number of D's and F's)?

E.E. Moise, the James Bryant Conant Professor of Mathematics and Education at Harvard, pointed out the fallacy of grading 'on the curve' to a class I took from him. Selective schools, such as the ones you cite, pick above-average kids. This cohort represents the upper part of the 'bell curve' that often is used in grading 'on the curve'. There is no mathematical basis in distorting the curve of the ability and achievement of these kids into another, new, bell curve. One could either make the average the initial average, in which case, yes, more than 50% of the kids would get above a C. Alternatively the average could be based on only the upper part of the curve that we picked, in which case the average should be a D or even a D- (to understand this, draw a picture of a bell curve, erase the lower half, and take the average of the remaining piece). Either way, a blindly enforced C average makes little sense.

The kids in the schools you cite are placed with other interesting kids and teachers who are excited about their fields of research, and who are (in general) deeply dedicated to innovative creative teaching. Why shouldn't they do well? Taking the attitude that we're going to filter them out is deeply wrong, I believe. I teach Physics, and believe I can teach real unadulterated Physics to (almost) anybody, much as ski instructors claim to believe that anybody can learn to ski. The challenge for me is to present the material clearly and carefully so that it's understood, developed, and used. My experience is that with effort and time (lots

of it), even the least mathematically inclined can learn Special Relativity in one quarter, for example, at the level that most Physics graduate students understand and use it. If a student majoring in Fine Arts or Near Eastern languages can solve the standard graduate-level problems in Special Relativity (many due to Einstein, but requiring only simple math), should they get a C or lower?

The other side of the coin is that there are indeed classes in many schools where the average is *below* a grade of C. I haven't yet seen an editorial bemoaning 'grade deflation' in the city's schools indicated by the lower-than-average performance on standardized tests. To be consistent, the same folks who want a C average at UI should lobby for a C average in our elementary schools on the IGAP tests.

The point is that there are absolute standards, and grading on the curve is a relative standard that makes little sense. Elementary school kids should know how to read, rite, and rithmetic; kids in college should master the material in their classes. These are largely absolute standards- the standard is set by a relative comparison to what we've come to expect as good performance, not by the average in the class.

The tension over how to grade at a university is long-standing. My dad taught Physics at MIT, and one year taught the huge first-year course taken by almost every first-year student (MIT is largely a technical school, so almost everybody takes physics). The title of the course was 'Maxwell's Equations', the four fundamental equations governing the behaviour of electricity, magnetism, and the propagation of light, radio, and TV waves. He put the question 'Write down Maxwell's Equations' on the final exam; he gave an F to any student who got them wrong. Unfortunately more than 800 students got them wrong. I was a kid- I remember obscene phone calls, and many phone calls from Deans and others who were faced with most of the college repeating their freshman year (Physics is a prerequisite for many other courses). Was he right? Should the average have been a C? He remarked 'It's possible I'm a lousy teacher, but certainly in a course with the title of 'Maxwell's Equations' the least you can ask is that a student be able to write them down by the end of the semester. I'm with him. Absolute standards (well, tempered by judgement and experience). And if everybody does really well on a hard exam, give them good grades! (For those curious how it ended up- he finally buckled under and gave a second exam. Not surprisingly, the second time everybody knew Maxwell's Equations. He said 'well, at least we didn't have the normal spring riots over the food this year'.)

Lastly, I can't resist commenting on your title 'Keeping College Customers Satisfied'. The notion of a college student as customer is shallow rancid hog-wash. The *parents* of the students are customers- no question. I just finished putting two kids through college, and I was treated like a customer- paid my bills, asked no questions, hoped for the best. But I hoped and trusted that my kids were treated not as customers, but as bright, funny, interesting young people, with a life ahead of them. They chose big, good, public colleges with a strong research faculty, where they could meet other interesting young folk and interesting dedicated faculty. I hoped that their strengths would be strengthened, and their weaknesses, most of which curiously look much like my own, and which in spite of many years

of trying I couldn't change much, would be finally attended to. Rough edges get smoothed, horizons broadened; a good school instills a confidence in being able to learn new things that a parent is no longer able to impart to a teenager. In contrast, customers of HMO's, the airlines, the telephone companies, are treated differently. I don't want my kids treated as customers, any more than I want my doctor to treat me as a customer (in both cases I'm not interested in repeat business). 'The Student is Your Customer' is a slogan for the mail-order degree factory, not for any school with teachers in it. We should stamp it out, and those who mindlessly promulgate it should move to professions other than education. Here's to old-fashioned standards...

Best wishes,

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