

Collegial Models for Enhancing the Performance of University Professors

Rodney A. Clifton & Hymie Rubenstein

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Executive summary

As Canadian universities restructure, they need to focus on providing the highest quality of teaching and scholarship. This paper presents a new perspective for evaluating and differentially rewarding teaching performance and scholarly output based on a system that has proven to be successful in many other fields. This reward system is cooperative because departmental faculty members would be collectively rewarded for their average overall performances. It differs from the current system of rewards that is both individualistic and “needs-based”—a system that forces faculty members to compete against each other, within and among departments, to achieve self-defined needs rather than group-defined objectives. We propose a system in which departments would be judged using readily available and easily interpreted data on teaching and scholarship, ensuring that the allocation of rewards would be fairer and more transparent. Specifically, we propose that rewards should be based on clearly defined objectives of good teaching and good scholarship and that meaningful incentives should be used so that departmental faculty members work together to achieve those objectives.

Introduction

Like universities in other countries, Canadian institutions of higher learning are slowly restructuring to meet the demands of relatively fixed or declining government revenues, on the one hand, and increased expectations from students, legislators, and the general public, on the other (see Brown 2000; Middaugh 2001; Trow 1996; Tudiver 1999). As universities restructure, they must keep their attention fixed on their most important functions: the provision of high-quality teaching and the production of high-quality scholarship (Middaugh 2001; Trow 1996).

Many commentators, both inside and outside universities, have suggested that some professors and administrators have diverted their attention from teaching and scholarship to other objectives, such as their own external consulting businesses or university-based manufacturing enterprises (see Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein 1997; Emberley 1996; Tudiver 1999; Tuinman, Thistle, and Strawbridge 1996; Zemsky and Massy 1990). The number of functions universities have come to value has expanded and, to some degree, the emphasis they place on teaching and scholarship has been diluted. Consequently, many professors are ambivalent about the time and attention they should give to their teaching and scholarship. They are abetted in this by the seeming indifference of administrators to improving teaching and scholarship.

Exactly how many professors are poor teachers, arbitrarily canceling classes, indifferent to the learning outcomes of their students, and employing outdated course material, is unknown. Similarly, it is hard to get accurate data, particularly at Canadian universities, on the number of professors who are unproductive scholars, do not receive research grants, and do not publish articles in respected national and international journals. Lucas (2000a: 46), for example, reports that at one prestigious private university in the United States, a study by senior administrators found that fewer than 50 percent of faculty members held research or development grants and that a substantial number were evaluated as poor teachers by their students. Middaugh (2001: 22–24) presents self-reported data from a large sample of faculty members in the United States suggesting that, on average, professors write about two articles and a book review every two years (see also Baird 1991; Keith and Babchuk 1994; Wanner, Lewis, and Gregorio 1981).

The paucity of published evidence on the performance of faculty members, especially for Canadian universities, is a reflection of the fact that few university administrators are willing or able to punish those who do not teach well or who do not engage in significant scholarly activity (see Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein, 1997: 129; Boyer 1990; Broder 1993; Hattie and Marsh 1996; Wanner, Lewis, and Gregorio 1981). What the available evidence, both published and anecdotal, does suggest is that, though there

are undoubtedly many fine teachers and productive scholars at Canadian universities, a substantial proportion of professors are relatively poor teachers, relatively poor scholars, or both. The poor performance of these faculty members is nearly impossible to remedy because of the multitude of objectives that have been incorporated into the mandates of universities, the entrenchment of past-practices, the protection of tenure, and powerful faculty trade unions, among other things.

A simple solution to this problem, of course, would be for universities to replace tenure with short-term renewable contracts, something that is increasingly being done in Canada and around the world (see Barnes and O'Hara 1999; Speirs, Amsel, Baines, and Pickel 1998). But, this solution would only deal with newly hired professors because extant legal, political, and normative considerations would make it almost impossible to terminate the contracts of tenured professors. Thus, a major problem facing senior administrators is how to enhance the teaching and scholarly performance of existing tenured professors, especially those whose performance is judged to be inadequate.

Another solution to the problem of poor performance is for universities to conduct systematic evaluation of tenured faculty members, commonly called post-tenure reviews (Licata 2000). Many universities and colleges in the United States have begun using post-tenure reviews as incentives for keeping the teaching and the scholarship of faculty members at acceptable levels. Unfortunately, many faculty members interpret these reviews negatively as being “re-tenuring” (Licata 2000: 107), a process that contradicts the traditional “contract-without-term” meaning of tenure. Nevertheless, some Canadian universities, following the lead of their American counterparts, are beginning to implement post-tenure reviews. At the University of Manitoba, for example, faculty members are reviewed yearly by the chairpersons of their departments but such annual “performance evaluations” are toothless tigers employed “primarily for formative purposes”:

Performance evaluations are not intended to supplant the rigorous evaluations that are carried out for the purpose of hiring, promotion or tenure, or to erode the status and security that is created by such processes (Collective Agreement between the University of Manitoba and the University of Manitoba Faculty Association 1999: 121)

A new system

This paper proposes a new system for evaluating and differentially rewarding both teaching and scholarly output. Specifically, we suggest how both teaching and scholarship can be enhanced and rewarded by using performance-based, but collegially grounded, models for compensating departments—rather than individuals—for the good teaching

and scholarship of their members. Our reading of the literature on incentives leads us to believe that clearly identified objectives, for both teaching and scholarship, along with meaningful incentives to achieve these objectives, will work in the same way that they work for productive teams in business, industry, government, and classroom learning (see Coleman 1990: 154; Slavin 1995; Wilson 1989: 321–23). While incentives have been successfully used in these areas, they have rarely, if ever, been used to improve departmental-based teaching and scholarship (see Altman 2000; Lucas 2000a, 2000b).

It is ironic, to say the least, that although many professors, particularly in faculties of business, education, physical education, and social work, use group-based cooperative learning techniques to motivate and reward their own students, and many professors in schools of management recommend that businesses and governments use “quality-of-work-life” programs to improve the productivity and job satisfaction of employees, universities have rarely, if ever, used such systems to motivate and reward their own professors. As James Heckman, Nobel Laureate economist, notes: “The problem in . . . education is primarily due to muted incentives, not to inadequate resources” (1999: 107). In other words, the available capital and other resources—money, professors, and support staff—can be used to establish effective incentives for both teaching and scholarship.

An incentive system for universities

There are already several ways that academics are rewarded for their performance and virtually all of them are based on differential individual assessments of teaching, scholarship, and service (Lucas 2000a). These rewards include: career progress increments; merit awards for superior individual performance; special salary increases to outstanding professors to prevent them from moving to other institutions; special named prizes for exemplary teaching and for outstanding research; special awards to correct individual salary anomalies; awards to address alleged pay inequities between male and female professors; and promotion through the ranks (see Altman 2000: 147; Rubenstein 2000).

A negative consequence of this system of only rewarding individual achievement is that academics collaborate far less than employers and employees in business, industry, and government. To be sure, lack of collaboration results to some extent from the nature of the scholarly enterprise—the need to explore and expand the limits of knowledge without fear of censure, censor, or institutional fetters—which makes professors semi-autonomous entrepreneurs who generally control what, when, and how they teach and conduct their research and whether, when, how, and where they publish their scholarly

papers and books. The downside of such intellectual autonomy is that, unlike employees in business and unlike other semi-autonomous entrepreneurs paid largely by “piece work”—lawyers, accountants, and medical doctors, for example—university professors still receive substantial financial rewards and considerable “free” time regardless of the quality of their teaching, the number of students they instruct, and the quantity and quality of their scholarship. In a recent review article on individual incentive systems used in universities, Altman writes:

Few issues in academic life are as controversial and as potentially damaging to institutional collegiality as the faculty reward system ... [W]hat kinds of performance are deemed meritorious are divisive decisions that may pit faculty members against administrators and, not infrequently, faculty members against one another. (Altman 2000: 138)

Three senior administrators at Memorial University in Newfoundland noted the irony of this situation in a paper they delivered to a meeting of Vice-Presidents of Canadian universities, saying that the individualism inherent in academic work has evolved to such a degree that it was almost impossible for administrators to obtain cooperative behaviour from faculty members:

By and large, faculty decide what kind of research they want to do and when and where it will be done; whether to publish the result or not; what conferences to attend to discuss their scholarly contributions; what they will do during their sabbatical year, where they will spend it, and so forth. For half the work for which he or she receives a salary, the faculty member makes all the decisions, with an absolute minimum of supervision. The other half of most faculty members' work year is devoted to teaching. Here too, faculty have a surprising amount of choice. Experienced faculty usually can choose what they teach, when they teach it, and to whom they teach it. They can select classrooms in which they teach, thus defining the size of the class; they decide on how they teach. From time to time, they can cancel classes or ask someone else to cover these, when other duties must prevail in their judgment. Faculty serve on many committees, few if any assigned. And when they choose not to attend the meetings of these committees, that is their business too ... [A]cademic work allows personal choice to employees beyond any degree available to all but the formally self-employed. (The self employed when they choose not to work, are not paid, of course. Here the faculty members have the advantage). (Tuinman, Thistle, and Stawbridge 1996: 11–12)

These senior administrators expressed sentiments that administrators and professors are increasingly concerned about at many other universities (see Middaugh 2001: 3–4).

Rampant individualism, while it might serve the interests of many university professors, is often antithetical to the collective interests and needs of departments, faculties, and universities, all of which need collective action to work effectively (see Fukuyama 1999: 168–230; Lucas 2000a, 2000b). Simply put, professors experience few, if any, positive or negative consequences for their indifference to the performance, good or bad, of their colleagues. In turn, senior administrators have been unable or unwilling to reform the extant system of incentives to focus the attention of professors on a relatively few, clearly stated, objectives in teaching and scholarship (Lucas 2000a). Moreover, senior administrators seem either unaware of the existence of, or unwilling to implement, incentive procedures to achieve greater cooperative behaviour from their faculty members. Such incentive systems, properly designed and implemented, could change the dispositions of faculty members from “my teaching and my scholarship” to “our teaching and our scholarship,” reflecting a change in values from individualism to cooperation.

Teaching

Teaching, especially instructing undergraduate students, at large research universities (Alberta, Dalhousie, Manitoba, McGill, Toronto, British Columbia, etc.) has never been a highly regarded part of the academic enterprise (see Hum 2000). At many institutions, professors often teach out of necessity, not because they love teaching or because they are inspiring teachers, sometimes taking delight in repeating the tired aphorism “this would be a great job if it weren’t for the students.” Derek Bok reports that, when he was appointed president of Harvard University in 1971, an old acquaintance suggested that he disband Harvard College, the undergraduate teaching centre:

By getting rid of the College, you will clearly acknowledge that teaching undergraduates has become an anachronism in the modern university . . . Teaching introductory economics to freshmen or European history to sophomores is a waste of talented scholars who should have no responsibilities that divert them from what they do uniquely well. (Bok 1986: 35–36)

A professor at the University of Michigan also illustrates the contempt many professors have for teaching: “Every minute I spend in an undergraduate classroom is costing me money and prestige” (quoted in Sowell 1993: 205). These responses may not represent the attitudes of most Canadian professors but they show the disrespect for classroom teaching shown by many professors, including those who succeed in negotiating reductions in their instructional “loads” if they receive research grants or if they assume special administrative responsibilities.

As a consequence, critics both inside and outside the university have noted that undergraduate students are often short-changed by poor teaching, huge classes, poorly designed examinations, grade inflation, ideological indoctrination, political correctness, and “Mickey-mouse” courses (see Anderson 1996; Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein 1997; Clifton 1999; Emberley 1996; Sowell 1993: 202–31; Sykes 1988). Student leaders at many Canadian universities are calling for more money to be directed towards improving teaching in classrooms and laboratories. Undergraduate students are also demanding that the quality of the teaching, for which they pay in part, be assessed using uniform institution-wide course-evaluation forms. Not surprisingly, many students want to see these assessments, professor-by-professor and department-by-department, published in a form that can be easily used in selecting courses and professors. Often, in strong and compelling language, undergraduates argue that fees have increased in lock-step with decreases in teaching and allied support services (small-group tutorials, teaching assistants, and well-equipped instructional laboratories). In virtually every Canadian university, students are insisting that they must be treated as active, informed, cash-paying “customers” who deserve high quality teaching.

Besieged from without and beset from within, universities are slowly, often reluctantly, paying more attention to the quality of teaching that undergraduate students receive (Trow 1996: 320–22). To be sure, some Canadian universities have been conducting and publicly distributing the results of standardized surveys of teaching for many years. In addition, every year universities reward a few of their best teachers with monetary or other benefactions. Virtually all universities in Canada have also created teaching centres offering workshops and short courses to help new and established professors improve their instruction.

But, as useful as publishing teaching evaluations, rewarding a few super-teachers, and establishing teacher-training services may be, they seem to have had little effect on raising the general quality of instruction. Rating professors on their classroom instruction may make teaching more transparent but it hardly makes it more accountable because such ratings rarely, by themselves, automatically translate into improved pedagogical performance for those who are poor teachers. This is not because, as some critics argue, it is possible to “rig” the results of teaching evaluations by relaxing standards or by giving out high grades. On the contrary, the higher-education literature suggests that students are not generally fooled by facile attempts to bribe them with little work or high grades (see Marsh and Dunkin 1992). In the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, for example, a teaching unit with relatively high overall grades, written comments from students illustrate that they are critical of the faculty’s academic standards and that they cannot be “bought off” with high grades:

Faculty of Education standards are low enough that, after a while, one wonders if this is not the last hope for most people who cannot make it in other faculties.

This is the easiest Faculty in which to get an extension. I feel that prospective teachers should learn how to get their work done on time.

If we as teachers are going to expect the best of our students, it has to start in the Faculty. You are generating lousy students by having such low standards.

The academic standard in this school is laughable. The courses are too easy; the professors spoon-feed the students. It is hard to take some courses seriously.

Education students are looked down upon by other faculties and many people that are not serious about teaching wind up in this Faculty.

Professors in the Faculty don't show signs of having set high goals for themselves and working hard to attain them, so why should I? (Clifton, Mandzuk, and Roberts 1994: *passim*)

In light of these criticisms, Clifton, Mandzuk, and Roberts argue that:

the student teachers value high academic standards and they expect their professors to do likewise. To these student teachers, courses and programs seem meaningless when high academic standards are neither expected nor valued by their professors. Moreover, they find it demeaning and demoralizing to be enrolled in a faculty that does not expect academic excellence. (Clifton, Mandzuk, and Roberts 1994: 185)

Well-constructed evaluations are able to reveal poor teaching by asking students whether the course was intellectually challenging and stimulating, whether the instructor was enthusiastic about teaching the course, whether the course was easy or difficult compared to other courses, whether the workload was light or heavy compared to other courses, how many hours of work outside of class were required, and so forth. Good evaluations also invite detailed written comments from students and these are often a valuable source of information about the quality of instruction. It is also possible and desirable for administrators to peruse course syllabi to determine student workloads (their form, appropriateness, and level of difficulty) and whether the readings and other material cover important current knowledge, approaches, and developments in the discipline. All of these data can then be used to assess the amount, if any, of grade inflation in a course.

The important point that should not be lost in this exercise is that everyone who has been a student or has taught at a university knows that poor teachers are rarely punished, let alone fired, regardless of whether or not they are evaluated on well-designed instruments. Likewise, granting teaching awards to a few super-stars has virtually no effect on the instructional proficiency of the vast majority of professors, even within the same department. In fact, some professors privately say that they would be ashamed to be recognized as an outstanding teacher, an appellation that is often taken to mean that one is “a mere teacher.” Likewise, teaching centres have limited effectiveness because poor teachers are rarely, if ever, forced to take courses to improve their performances.

Even though student-based course evaluations are increasing in number, reliability, and validity, they are mainly used to provide information to professors about the efficacy of their own teaching. Many universities now publish the course evaluations of professors but relatively few print them in “user-friendly” ways that help students select and avoid courses and professors. Even when universities present the course evaluations in ways that make it easy for students to use, they rarely, if ever, reward departments who have good teachers and punish departments who have bad teachers.

The ironical result of this is that, when students flee from courses taught by poor teachers to courses taught by good teachers, this makes poor teachers better off. This perversely enhances the well-being of poor teachers because having fewer students translates into lighter teaching loads, which translates into more time for scholarship, the part of the job that receives the most rewards (Hum 2000). Conversely, good teachers are often made worse off because they are saddled with a disproportionate number of students, particularly struggling students. Hence, good teachers have a disproportionately higher workload in the form of more essays to mark, more tests to grade, more students to advise, and more weak students to help. This all means that they have less time to conduct research.

Consequently, even without publishing course and professor evaluations, where two professors are teaching different sections of the same course, a common practice at the undergraduate level, and where one of them is a good teacher and the other is a poor teacher, students will try to enrol in, or switch to, the good professor’s section using information they have received via the student grapevine or from their own experience after attending a few classes. When they are blocked from enrolling in a preferred section by course ceilings or timetable conflicts, they may drop the course. The publication of evaluations probably exacerbates this process because it gives students more reliable data on which to make their decisions.

The result is that universities have, if only inadvertently, institutionalized a system in which good professors are punished for teaching well while poor professors are rewarded

for teaching badly. This perverse incentive system leads to an important challenge for university administrators and professors who truly value good teaching: how to make course evaluations (and allied sources of information) effective tools for rewarding good teaching and punishing poor teaching. We suggest that this can be done by applying the basic theoretical principles of cooperative learning and team-based management (see Clifton 1999; Coleman 1990: 421–50; Slavin 1995).

The application of these basic principles can be illustrated by a simple hypothetical example. First, suppose that the evaluations of courses and professors range from a low of 1 to a high of 10 on a reliable and valid evaluation form. Second, assume that 20% of university departments (as opposed to individual professors) have overall average scores above 7 and that 20% have average scores below 4. Courses with more students would have higher weights than courses with fewer students to ensure that every student's evaluation in every course carries the same weight. Finally, suppose that average teaching scores, weighted by the number of students in the various courses, are calculated for each teaching department.

Departments with an average teaching score above a certain level, say level 7, would be given credits for additional resources—more money for teaching assistant and supplies; upgraded classrooms and laboratory facilities; a greater share of the library budget; additional academic and other positions; and so on—while departments below this cut-off level would not receive credits for additional resources. In turn, departments below a certain level, say level 4, would lose credits. In other words, the professors in departments below the lower cut-off point would have fewer resources because their average teaching performance was low. The basic principle is simple: rewards are given to departments in which the professors are, on average, good teachers while resources are taken from departments in which the professors are, on average, poor teachers. This system of rewards and punishments is based on professors cooperating and supporting each other. The system is group-based and cooperative rather than individually-based and competitive, as is now generally the case at Canadian universities.

Scholarship

The second problem universities need to address is improving the scholarship of professors. Surprising to some, scholarship can be viewed as very similar to teaching: scholarship is, in fact, the way professors teach their colleagues. Consequently, scholarship can be promoted much as teaching is promoted. To be sure, measuring scholarly productivity (number and length of publications; reputation of the journals or presses

where publication takes place; size of research grants; number of journal citations; etc.) may be more difficult than quantifying teaching performances (see Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997). These difficulties are not insurmountable, however, as many studies that have ranked various research departments on their scholarly productivity illustrate (see, for example, Graves, Marchand, and Thompson 1982, 1984; Hirsch, Austin, Brooks, and Moore 1984; Hogan, 1984).

What the many professors who question the precise and systematic evaluation of scholarly output choose to forget is that professors are experts in assessing scholarly performance because they spend a great deal of time judging and ranking the work of students, both undergraduates and graduates, reviewing the work of other scholars, adjudicating grant applications, and sitting on tenure and promotion committees, all of which involves using both quantitative and qualitative assessments of scholarly performance (see Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997).

In order to reward scholarship, we suggest the use of either of two collegial, performance-based models: a normative model and a criterion model. The normative model can be illustrated by using the same principles that were used to highlight the collective, department-based, reward for effective teaching.

Once again, using a 10-point scale based on scholarly productivity over a specific period of time, and assuming that there is a range from a low of 1 to a high of 10 among departments, then units with an average productive scholarship score above level 7 would be given additional resources while departments with average scores below this cut-off level but above level 4, would not receive new resources. In turn, departments with average scores below level 4 would lose research resources and departing academic and other personnel would not be replaced.

This reward system is normative because departments are competing against each other and it is cooperative because all faculty members in departments are collectively rewarded and punished for their average scholarly performance. It differs from the current university system that is individualistic and needs-based and, as already noted, forces faculty members to compete against each other, even against colleagues in the same department, on the basis of individual scholarly productivity rather than cooperating in helping each other become more productive and thereby increasing their departmental ranking.

Under a collegial, performance-based system of rewards, departments would be judged by publicly reported data and this would make the decisions of administrators more transparent: resources would go to departments that have the most productive scholars while those with the least productive scholars would lose resources. Moreover,

because there would be an institutionalized system for evaluating and rewarding departments, this system would be perceived by all parties as being more transparent, accountable, and impartial than the present system. All faculty members would know what the evaluation criteria were, even if they disagreed with the criteria, and they would be informed about the performance of their department and other departments in periodic rankings.

The second model, the criterion model, would also be team-based but, unlike the normative model, it would give recognition to extant performance differences in scholarship among departments. The model would involve departments signing agreements with deans or other senior administrators to exceed their average scholarly performance score measured over a period of time, such as the previous five-year period. (This average score would be the departmental base score.) Contracts would be based on achieving an average increase in performance over the base score. Departments exceeding their base scholarly score by, say, 10% or more would receive rewards; those that varied up or down by less than 10% would receive no rewards; and those that declined by 10% or more would give up resources. A weighting system would be used to ensure that truly exceptional departments, those that are ranked very high nationally or internationally and those that maintain their high level of productivity, would not be forced to subsidize less productive departments. In other words, highly productive departments would automatically receive rewards because they have achieved national or international standards of scholarship.

Briefly, we have outlined a few ways of changing the incentive system so that university professors could become more proficient teachers and more productive scholars. In order for these systems to work effectively, however, at least three ancillary policies need to be implemented.

Ancillary policies

First, the best professors in poor departments must be prevented from breaking away and joining other good professors to form new departments of super-teachers or super-scholars, as sometimes now happens even in the absence of group-based rewards. The easiest way to do this is to provide rewards on a sliding scale so that larger departments receive rewards of higher value than smaller departments. We suggest that, overall, the number of professors in a department should be around 20, the size of highly effective and productive units within many organizations (see Clifton 1999; Wilson 1989: 369, 375). At present, less than 18% of the departments at the University of Manitoba, our

home institution, contain 20 or more members; and 44% contain fewer than 10 professors. A perusal of the academic calendars from other Canadian universities shows the same pattern.

Reducing the number of small departments and increasing the size of existing departments to about 20 faculty members would, by themselves, enhance teaching and scholarship because dozens of departmental chairpersons, now saddled with administrative duties, would be brought back into the classroom and laboratory and back to their writing desks to engage in scholarly activities. Parenthetically, increasing the size of departments could also help bring down the size of large classes and increase the number of students enrolled in departments because more professors would be available for teaching. Though the literature suggests that reducing class size may not, by itself, improve the quality of teaching, smaller classes could improve out-of-class learning because professors would be able to assign and grade more term papers and prepare more sophisticated assignments for students.

Second, in order to improve both learning outcomes and the efficient use of resources, adjustments must be made to policies on the withdrawal of students from courses. Currently, a number of Canadian universities allow students to quit courses without academic penalty and with only a proportional financial loss months after classes have begun. Consequently, students can register in courses, do little or no work, and exit a few weeks before courses end, wasting their time, the time of their professors and, in cooperative learning and other small-group teaching settings, the time of other students. Leaving the voluntary withdrawal date at a few weeks before the end of classes also encourages students to be irresponsible, the antithesis of what credible universities should be doing. In other words, students who are not seriously engaged in their studies can affect the teaching performances of their professors, especially if the professors are using student-centred, cooperative learning procedures. Moreover, these students can hinder the scholarship of the more dedicated students and this can adversely affect the assessment of professors on formal evaluation exercises. As a practical measure, we suggest that withdrawal dates should be set at about three weeks after courses begin.

Finally, teaching units should be rewarded for increasing their graduation rates ensuring, of course, that this does not tempt them to decrease the standards of performance required from their students. This is an important innovation because universities perennially ask ministries of education for increased funding to increase the number of “seats” available to students. Unfortunately, this input-based arrangement encourages universities to enrol weak students. Conversely, focussing on outputs based on graduation rates is more likely to persuade provincial governments to “invest” more public money on universities because this represents a more efficient and accountable use of these funds.

In the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education, the Commissioner, Stuart Smith, noted “that universities [and provincial governments] have no real idea of their [universities’] attrition rates” (1991: 105). He used very crude data to report that about 42% of full-time students who began working towards a degree in 1985 failed to graduate by 1990 (Smith 1991: 105). At the University of Manitoba, less than 30% of students graduate in four years and less than 60% graduate in six years. In other words, almost 40% of entering students fail to receive a degree in six years (Office of Institutional Analysis 2001: 60), a percentage that is similar to that reported by Smith. We think that these graduation rates could be improved by establishing target levels, such as a 10% increase within four years, with rewards for teaching units that meet this goal. Of course, a disinterested system of assessment would be necessary to ensure that standards are maintained, if not enhanced.

Why this system will work

“Pay-for-performance” is not a radical idea. It is already incorporated into the remuneration packages for professors at Canadian universities. As already mentioned, these include annual raises, special merit awards, other prizes for excellence in teaching and research, special-purpose salary increases, and even rank-related increments. The additional system of pay for departmental performance that we suggested above would shift some existing allocations from needs-based to performance-based incentives and from the performances of individual professors to the performances of departments. Using James Heckman’s apt phrase, our departmental-based system is designed to break down the “muted incentives” (1999: 107) that are inherent in the way universities are organized. The system of incentives we propose is designed, in broad strokes, to preserve extant university collective decision-making while making the teaching and scholarly performance of professors more transparent, accountable, and related to the distribution of resources.

As willing as professors are to test new ideas and new ways of doing things on, and for, other people, many seem reluctant to accept new ways of organizing their own workplace activities (Cheldelin 2000). In fact, the criticisms that will be levelled against our system by our colleagues will provide ample evidence for this claim. The reward systems we have outlined are skeletal and need to be fleshed out before they can be implemented; we recognize that the devil is in these details. Many of our colleagues, however, will dismiss our proposals because we have not provided a detailed strategy for implementing them or because we are “commercializing” university work (see Hum 2000; Tudiver 1999). Ironically, these criticisms might kill the idea even at universities

where increasing numbers of professors are using similar systems—cooperative programs between departments and businesses, team-based laboratory projects, cooperative learning strategies, and so on—in their own classrooms and departments.

The main difficulty with this system of incentives is not its intrinsic credibility. There would be, however, considerable difficulty implementing such a system because of the politics of universities—academic freedom, rampant individualism, tenure, and other entrenched policies and procedures. Ironically, this resistance would occur even though the reward system we propose would replace one rooted in actual or perceived serendipity and favouritism with one based on enhanced levels of objectivity, fairness, transparency, and accountability. Faculty members would clearly know the goals in teaching and scholarship; they would clearly know the criteria that would be used in determining if the objectives have been, individually and collectively, attained; and they would clearly know their individual and collective rank in performance hierarchies. Moreover, under our system, professors would clearly know what they would need to do in order to improve their position.

Under these conditions, the extensive literature on performance-based reward systems used in other areas suggests that department members would work cooperatively to improve their average teaching and scholarly performances. This would happen because there would be real consequences, positive and negative, for professors and departments doing so. In other words, some departments would be rewarded, in money, resources, positions, and time, for keeping their average teaching and scholarly performance high or for improving their overall performances. Conversely, other departments would be punished for having low average performances or allowing their average performance to fall. If departments are rewarded for their good performances, their members are also rewarded; if departments are punished for poor performances, their members are also punished.

To be sure, our models could not be introduced overnight, especially in departments full of irascible middle-aged professors unwilling or unable to change their ways. Conversely, it may be relatively easy to introduce new methods of rewarding differential performances in departments experiencing high turnovers in membership. Such turnovers may come to all Canadian universities sooner rather than later. The retirement of faculty hired between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, combined with a possible 20% increase in student enrolment, mean that by 2010 universities will probably replace as many faculty members as are currently employed (Frank 2000).

Taking hiring more seriously than it is now—making sure new recruits are above the mean performance level of existing faculty—also helps answer the possible libertarian

critique that star professors may resent the possibility of being dragged down by the less than stellar performance of their colleagues. Moreover, truly exceptional individuals normally help attract other truly exceptional scholars, a process that is well established in the great American and British universities.

The literature suggests that under this type of system, newly hired and extant department members would attempt to assist each other become better teachers and scholars because they and their departments would receive rewards for doing so. Specifically, if these procedures were implemented, few departments would put their worst and most inexperienced teachers in large first-year classes, as often now occurs, and department members would employ peer pressure and other sanctions to oblige their worst teachers to improve their performances, something that rarely occurs now (see Lucas 2000a: 22–23). Peer pressure, encouragement, praise, blame, and shame, all forms of social control that are effective in small groups, would be the main sanctions to get poor performers to do better. Good scholars and teachers who are independently motivated would flourish under this system; academic underachievers who need the formal encouragement of their colleagues, the academic equivalent of “the carrot and the stick,” would also see a boost in their performance. Conversely, as in other workplaces, some poor performers who adversely affect the well-being of their departments would likely resign when their behaviour was subject to ongoing rebuke from their concerned colleagues.

At present, indifference to both teaching and scholarly performance of colleagues happens because there is little incentive for good professors to help poor ones improve. This results because the system of incentives in universities is based on individual responsibility rather than group accountability. In fact, there is much anecdotal evidence of professors who feel frustrated, even demoralized, because some of their departmental colleagues are poor teachers or poor scholars who get away with teaching relatively few students or engaging in little productive scholarship.

A performance-based reward system would also ensure that members of a department consider how the assignment of people to teaching and scholarly responsibilities would help the average performance of their department. Individual professors would carefully consider not only their own assignments but those of all other members of their department in order to maintain or improve its ranking. For the same reason, each member of a department would have an incentive to appraise deliberately the teaching abilities and performances of graduate students, sessional instructors, and newly-hired professors. If, for example, a department were to hire a poor professor and its average teaching or scholarly performance dropped below the highest cut-off level, the department would not receive additional resources the next year; if the newly hired professor caused the average performance to fall below the lowest cut-off, the department would be penalized and

all members would suffer. If, on the other hand, the newly hired professor increased the average performance of the department, the department and its members would be rewarded accordingly. Everyone would gain by their collective performance.

The implicit assumption in Canadian higher education is that becoming a good academic is the sole responsibility of individual professors. Indeed, good teaching is often devalued by many professors. If more than lip service is to be paid to good teaching and if the interests of students are given their proper due, universities must do more to ensure high-quality teaching by their professors. One way to do this is to encourage professors to help each other become better teachers by instituting meaningful and workable systems of collective rewards and punishments (see Clifton 1999).

As Canadian universities restructure to meet the demands of tight financial resources and higher societal expectations, they need to pay more attention to the enhancement of both the teaching and scholarship of each and every professor. It is recommended that this enhancement should focus on moving from a needs-based model to a performance-based model. Recently, Francis Fukuyama has noted that:

Individuals amplify their own power and abilities by following cooperative rules that constrain their freedom of choice, allow them to communicate with others, and coordinate their action. Social virtues like honesty, reciprocity, and keeping commitments are not choiceworthy just as ethnical values; they also have tangible dollar value and help the groups who practice them achieve shared ends. (Fukuyama 1999: 14)

In essence, our argument is that collegial performance-based reward systems, such as the system outlined in this report, are much more likely to enhance the quality of our universities than the needs-based reward systems that are currently in place.

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About the authors

Rodney A. Clifton is Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Manitoba, where he has been teaching since 1979. He was born in Jasper, Alberta, and he taught at Memorial University for six years before moving to Manitoba. Dr Clifton has a B.Ed. and a M.Ed. from the University of Alberta, a Ph.D. in Sociology of Education from the University of Toronto, and a Fil.Dr. in Comparative Education from the University of Stockholm. Over the last 30 years, he has published more than 90 research articles and five books and monographs. Dr. Clifton has won a number of research awards: the Spencer Fellowship from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement; the R.W.B. Jackson Research Award from the Canadian Educational Researchers' Association; and both the Edward Sheffield Award and the Distinguished Research Award from the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education. He can be contacted at Clifton@ms.UManitoba.CA.

Hymie Rubenstein is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Manitoba, where he has been teaching since 1973. He was born in Toronto and is a triple-degree holder from the University of Toronto (B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.). His doctoral research took him to the small Eastern Caribbean country of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where he has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork ever since. This research has resulted in two books and dozens of articles on such topics as peasant family life, community organization, labour migration, small farming, and illegal drugs. Dr. Rubenstein has also written dozens of newspaper and other articles on such topics as academic accountability, student performance standards, pay equity, and unionization. He is the author of the Fraser Institute's recent publication, *Rewarding University Professors: A Performance-Based Approach* (Public Policy Sources 44). He can be contacted at Rubenst@cc.UManitoba.CA.

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