

SMC ETHICS

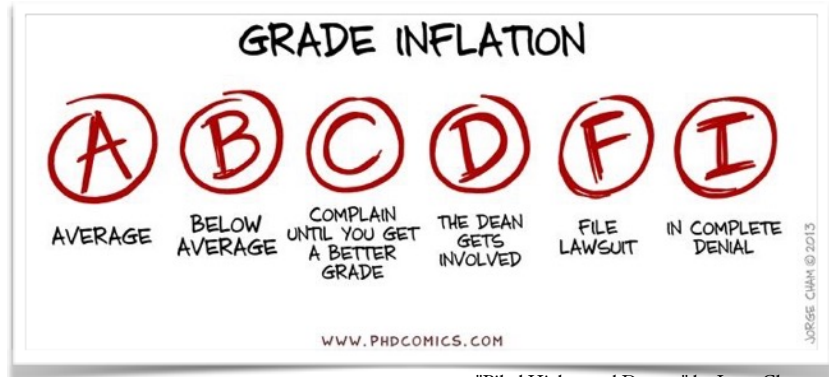
Continuing a Dialogue on What We Do and How We Do It

Jim Stramel

The Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee wants to acknowledge the passing of Jim Stramel Thursday, March 17th. Jim was chair of PERC for several years and an important ethical voice on campus as a Professor of Philosophy. His time on this committee laid the groundwork for everything we are doing now and we are in debt to his service to Santa Monica College.

Rate My Professor

Let's admit it: almost all of us want our online selves to be "liked." A growing body of research in sociology, psychology, and neuroscience only confirms our intimate awareness of how deeply our digital habits influence our emotional and personal wellbeing. In recent years, however, websites such as Rate My Professor have threatened to reduce even our professional lives to the level of a high school popularity contest. Whether you secretly gloat about your 5.0 rating or lose sleep in outrage over a student's "unjust" description of your personal appearance, RMP is hard for the 21st century teacher to ignore. Whatever legitimate uses RMP may have for students (and to be fair, they shouldn't be totally discounted),



"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham

Grade Inflation and High Standards

Professor X is amazing!!! She will provide you with all the tools for success: class notes, study guides, and extra credit. I purchased the book but didn't really need it. I passed the class with an A. I truly enjoyed going to her class!!! In short, if you decide to take her, she'll become your next best professor.
(Real Rating, ratemyprofessors.com)

In 1999, the first version of "Ratemyprofessors.com" (RMP) was launched and by 2008, RMP was listed as a "top 50 website" by *Time* magazine. Yet serious questions were raised about who was posting, why they were posting and, as the above quote illustrates, enthusiastic ratings of professors with minimal reading requirements.

As public employees, professors are responsible for helping our students develop the skills they will need as workers and as citizens. It is therefore important to question the likely impact of our courses as our students ultimately confront the real world. In 2011, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa began addressing that question in their groundbreaking book titled *Academically Adrift*. Their study of over 2,000 full-time students revealed that the "portable" skills of critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing are best developed

it also far too easily allows some students to coast through college by taking only those teachers approved by their online peers as "easy." Such students, and their numbers are significant, manage to avoid intellectual rigor whenever possible while artificially inflating their GPA. We, as teachers, may in turn feel tempted to lower our academic standards when faced with students who, accustomed to unchallenging coursework, resist our high expectations or prefer to fill up the sections of our colleagues who have a more favorable online reputation. Just as every Twitter or Facebook user should regularly reflect on the healthiness of their relationship with the social network, we as faculty must regularly reflect on if and how we allow websites such as Rate My Professor to influence our teaching, and therefore, the entire college.



RMP Survey

While the ethics of the above exchange are questionable, the value of your feedback is not! Please take a minute (two at most) to complete the accompanying [survey](#)! We will send a follow-up email with the results, and hope you continue to engage in this discussion!

through (appropriately) rigorous reading and writing requirements; students who fail to acquire these skills are seriously disadvantaged in their post-college lives.

Arum and Roksa worried that students may use websites such as RMP to select less demanding professors thus effectively sabotaging their futures. Their research showed that college graduates with relatively high GPAs but low scores on a test of portable skills were twice as likely to be living with their parents, three times as likely to be unemployed and, two years after leaving college, twice as likely to have been terminated from employment. Importantly, inadequate growth in these skills was linked with low civic engagement, with one third of poorly skilled students reading the news (online or in print) or discussing politics with others "monthly or never."

Standards are, of course, set by practices on the ground. SMC has a large population of students with transfer aspirations. The pressure to obtain a high final grade can feel enormous. Teaching practices that combine few reading and writing requirements with inflated grades and, of course, student strategies such as avoiding rigorous classes using resources such as RMP can create a perfect storm of lower standards, creating pressure on other faculty to lower their own standard. It is our responsibility to our students, the community and our fellow faculty to preserve a culture of high standards.

As members of an educational community, we need to reflect on our own standards for our students – how many of us, if given the chance as undergraduates, would have chosen the path of least resistance to that all-important A? Time is valuable in college; if we put ourselves in their shoes, it becomes easier to understand why students would want a system that saves them as much time out of the classroom as possible. Consistent with this, RMP currently includes a rating scale for whether a textbook is "mandatory" and also optional "tag words" including "get ready to read." Both suggest that significant reading requirements may qualify a course as distinctive. Low reading (and writing) requirements are a trend that has real, measurable consequences both for our students' and for our society's well-being.

CONTACT US!

If you have any ideas or issues you would like to submit to the Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee for future consideration, get in touch with us through the links below.

[PERC website](#)

[email](#)