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SEAN MURRAY

## TEACHING AND TENURE IN THE VOCATIONALIZED UNIVERSITY

### Abstract

Neoliberalism has effected numerous changes in terms of how institutions of higher education define themselves and their relationships with students, parents, and the business world. One specific change that has been researched by scholars is the increased vocational emphasis colleges are giving to their missions and curricula. Henry Giroux, for instance, has written extensively about what the vocationalizing and corporatizing of higher learning might mean for education and democracy itself. One specific, related implication is how this focus on career training is shaping the pedagogical experiences of tenure-track faculty. To some extent, many schools include student course evaluations as a part of the reappointment and tenure process. But even at schools where this component is deemphasized or not included, it's nearly impossible for faculty to ignore how students are rating them online. This article will trace the ascendancy of both vocationalized higher education and course evaluations, as well as offer possibilities for addressing these developments.

“The main storyline for higher education during the past half century is the rise in demand for vocational instruction.”

~ Victor E. Ferrall, Jr., President Emeritus of Beloit College (2011)

In May 2012, my semester's end ritual of seeing how I fared on the website Rate My Professor turned up this befuddling, double-edged gem: “I agree that some in-class activities serve no purpose and do not help in any way, but Professor Murray is still a great professor to have!” I was at a loss for how to feel—happy, because an anonymous student labeled me “great,” or lousy, because there's no discernable rhyme or reason for a portion of the activities I prepare for my first-year English composition students. Due to the vagueness of the criticism-cum-praise, I had to rely on the informal, midterm feedback I collected from students a few months prior. While a majority of the 70-odd written responses indicated satisfaction with the course and reported no need for major changes or improvements, there was a faction of students who expressed frustration over being required to A) reflect on their writing process and B) participate in peer-review for the drafts and revisions of their writing projects. At least one of these responses specifically pointed out that because I was the one who gave the grades, there was no point to students' offering each other feedback.

I saw in these comments a chance to broach questions in class about the rationale for higher education in general and writing courses in particular. During the conversation, students expressed concerns over

grades and employment after graduation; at least a few stated that their primary goal in our course was to earn an A, and that this A would help their grade point average, which would in turn help them land a job or a spot in a graduate program. After empathizing with them over the reality of grades and jobs, I attempted to make a case for education that was pragmatic, yes, but also aimed at the lofty goals of personal development and social justice. Reflecting on our writing, I suggested, was related to sharpening metacognition. The capacity to think deeply about our own habits and mental processes, I said, was something employers valued *and* a vital trait for citizens in a healthy, functioning democracy (note: my actual explanation was a bit more rambling, sprinkled with a handful “umms,” and at least one audible yawn from my audience). Peer review sessions, I continued, provide practice for thinking and reading critically, both key skills demanded in our new information economy; moreover, I asked, aren’t the abilities to parse information and formulate thoughtful opinions essential for building a more ethical world? Some students nodded and smiled, some appeared indifferent, a few looked confused, and at least one or two seemed utterly unconvinced, to put it politely. More likely than not, it was a member of this last set who articulated the “no purpose” comment on Rate My Professor.

While humanities and liberal arts instructors may be more familiar with the “What’s the point?” refrain than their counterparts in business and the sciences, the increasingly vocationalized bent to college and university life is likely to render career pragmatism and marketable skills the sole objectives for undergraduates in courses across the board. Furthermore, this utilitarian mindset is sure to be felt by faculty ranging from adjuncts and graduate assistants to full professors. In particular, instructors seeking promotion and tenure must often grapple with the implications of this trend, as Student Evaluations of Faculty (SEFs) are officially used as part of this process at a significant number of institutions. But even at schools where SEFs are deemphasized or left out of decisions related to tenure and promotion, it’s difficult for faculty not to feel some pressure from student attitudes about the purposes of higher learning; after all, a tense classroom environment resulting from the conflicting agendas of instructor and pupils will be duly noted by the administrator whose evaluation *does* carry weight. In this article, after tracing the ascendancy of both vocationalized higher education and SEFs, I will examine possibilities for addressing these developments.

### **Vocationalized Higher Education and Neoliberalism**

The increasing vocational nature of higher learning, of course, is not occurring in a vacuum, but is part of the larger neoliberal trajectory sweeping across continents, countries, *and* college campuses. United States educational institutions are arguably the most indicative of this pattern, but they are far from alone. Even the U.S.’s northern neighbor of Canada, with its proud, progressive tradition, has more or less embraced a market-friendly model of higher education. Neil Tudiver (1999), author of *Universities for Sale: Resisting Corporate Control Over Canadian Higher Education*, contends that although Canada adopted this paradigm later than the U.S., United Kingdom, and Australia, its “universities are [now] being run more like businesses than institutions devoted to teaching, research, and community service” (p. xii-2). This opening of the ivory tower in North America and all over the globe to the dynamics of privatization and the market exists on a metaphorical level, representing different things to different people; consequently, David L. Kirp (2003), professor of public policy at University of California at Berkeley, suggests, “The notion that higher education is a ‘market’ needs to be unpacked” (p. 2). As just a brief overview, the rise of the neoliberal academy has brought us for-profit institutions, school administrators with backgrounds in the business world, a surge in the number of contingent faculty, the outsourcing of campus food services and bookstores to corporate chains, and students repositioned as customers/consumers. Against this backdrop, education itself has undergone a marked transformation, with classrooms and curricula shifting toward career preparation. So, to fully grasp the vocational trend itself, it’s essential that the surrounding context must be comprehended—intervention will be impossible without fathoming the entire story.

Noted scholars of higher education's history, politics, and culture have largely denounced the vocationalized trend. Henry A. Giroux (2001), for instance, emphasizes what is lost when marketplace values infiltrate the educational agenda:

Within the ongoing logic of neoliberalism, teaching and learning are removed from the discourse of democracy and civic culture—defined as a purely private affair. Divorced from the imperatives of a democratic society, pedagogy is reduced to a matter of taste, individual choice, and job training... Reduced to the status of training, pedagogy in its conservative and neoliberal versions appears completely at odds with those versions of critical teaching designed to provide students with the skills and information necessary to think critically about the knowledge they gain, and what it might mean for them to challenge antidemocratic forms of power. (p. 8)

In essence, what's at stake here, according to Giroux and numerous other critical pedagogues, is the very lifeblood of democracy, as grandiose as that may sound. When higher learning becomes more about students adapting themselves to the demands of the current socioeconomic system, then our colleges and universities have basically been made over as modern-day equivalent of trade schools.

While the accelerating forces of globalization over recent decades have certainly played a major role in ramping up the vocational emphasis at institutions of higher learning, this educational shift didn't happen overnight. In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011) point to post-World War II as an era of pivotal transformation, with colleges moving away from moral and academic missions, and instead welcoming "technocratic" agendas that would gain students access to "professional and managerial positions" (p. 13) in the corporate world. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a deepening of this trend, perhaps due in part to the decline in public financial support for higher education. Edward Luttwak (2000), Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explains that this is the period when the U.S. economy turned toward "turbo-capitalism," a system under which "public institutions, from *universities* and botanic gardens to prisons" began behaving more akin to "private enterprises run for profit [emphasis mine]" (p. 27). This pattern of quasi-privatization was accompanied by dwindling federal dollars and the palpable impression among students that colleges were not doing enough to prepare them for stable careers (Shumar, 1997). In response, schools started to "produce new specialized degrees and certificates in order to make buyers desire the product" (Shumar, p. 83).

But even before institutions made this switch, many U.S. undergraduates have looked at college as a means to very practical ends—that is, jobs. Compositionist Russel Durst (1999) suggests that this "long tradition of American pragmatism" (p. 3) stretches back centuries, at least as far back as Alexis de Toqueville's observations in *Democracy in America*, if not further. So, whether it's the spirit of the Protestant work ethic, galloping globalization—or most likely, a complex combination of these factors—it's become clear that American colleges are catering more than ever to students hyper-focused on gaining skills readily translatable to the job market.

This reality has become apparent to me both inside and *outside* the classroom. During the summer of 2011, I read the following in an advertisement for Marymount Manhattan College at a New York City subway station: "This is your 10 AM class. This is your internship. This is your backyard. This is Marymount Manhattan, a college of the liberal arts." Amidst the enticing cityscape images, what really grabbed my attention was the picture accompanying the internship line—a shot of a Wall Street subway station. The fact that the phrase "liberal arts" was positioned inches away from an image of the world's financial epicenter made the message all the more arresting. For me, this poster ad succinctly captured the fact that for many, college is a stop along the way to a career in Corporate America. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand (2011) quantifies the trend: "The No. 1 major in America is, in fact, business. Twenty-two per cent of bachelor's degrees are awarded in that field...More than twice as many degrees are given out every year in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies as in philosophy and religion. Since 1970, the more higher education has expanded, the more the liberal-arts sector has shrunk in

proportion to the whole.” My own class rosters over the past several years represent a microcosm of Menand’s breakdown, with a variety of business students ruling the roost (finance, accounting, actuarial science, management, and marketing) followed by future pharmacists, and a throng of undergraduates studying the likes of sports management, hospitality management, and a brand new field—homeland and corporate security. In a sense, these students seem to be betting, rolling the dice, hoping that their huge investment in college and the emerging knowledge economy will pay off. Given the choice between classics and computer security systems, it is no wonder that students are opting for the latter.

Durst (1999) suggests that the utilitarian bent of students pitted against the critical thinking objectives favored by many instructors make for a “collision course.” Assuming these collisions continue to escalate as pragmatism becomes the overriding emphasis for undergraduates, parents, and institutions, what will be the pedagogical implications? Will SEFs become less a means for instructors to improve upon methods and more a gauge for assessing how closely they are tailoring their teaching to the prevailing classroom atmosphere?

### **Student Evaluations: Context and Implications**

SEFs have a fairly extensive history, dating back to the 1920s at the University of Washington (Haskell, 1997). In the 1960s, the use of these evaluations increased, “as a means of empowering disenfranchised students” (Lazere, 2009, p. 531). Currently, it’s estimated that over 90% of U.S. institutions of higher education give students the opportunity to evaluate their instructors (Murray, 2005). The rationale for this widespread acceptance seems quite reasonable. If faculty are to get a sense of how it is to be on the other end of a lecture, discussion, assignment, or exam, then of course student perspectives are completely necessary. Moreover, there is some encouraging evidence in terms of how students assess their instructors. For instance, a recent summary of the articles published on student evaluations between 1970 and 2010 concluded that “student ratings tend to be statistically reliable, valid, and relatively free from bias” (Benton and Cashin, 2012). An older study demonstrated a positive correlation between the “Workload/Difficulty” of a course and students’ high opinion of an instructor (Marsh, 1980) – in essence, the more students are challenged, the more satisfied they are.

However, the validity of SEFs has not gone unchallenged. For example, a recent “Ohio State study—in many ways larger and more ambitious than previous ones—found a strong correlation between grades in a course and reviews of professors, such that it is clear that students are rewarding those who reward them” (Jaschik, 2007). This finding directly calls into question the belief that student evaluations are unbiased and untainted by the difficulty of a course. Just as troubling, the study found that female and foreign-born professors were rated lower than their counterparts (Jaschik, 2007). Perhaps most damning of all, though, was that these researchers were unable to establish a clear link between evaluations and student learning (Jaschik, 2007).

Another criticism of SEFs is that what constitutes effective teaching remains fuzzy and highly debatable. For starters, Vincent M. Filak and Kennon M. Sheldon (2003) list “knowledge, enthusiasm, organisation, classroom management, fairness, openness...group interaction, individual rapport, clarity, coverage, [and] grading” (p. 235) as just some of the qualities students take into consideration when assessing their instructors. While this catalog seems quite valid—and likely corresponds with pedagogical abilities faculty themselves value—the problem is that it is not always clear why undergraduates emphasize the criteria they do. Or, if a student is providing a numerical value to a preselected criterion, as is often the case, it can be vague as to how s/he arrived at that number. For instance, if the pedagogical ability in question is related to engaging a classroom of students, is the instructor’s performance being averaged out over the entire semester? Are particularly interesting or dull class sessions given more weight? Are students taking into consideration the extent to which course material can best be delivered through open discussion and/or lecture format? Is the instructor being compared to other faculty, and if so, faculty in general, or just ones in related courses? In short, students’ rationale for what exactly they value and how they form their opinions is frequently less than 100% transparent. This phenomenon could be easily

illustrated by stopping people on the street and asking who their favorite teacher was and why—one can imagine the dizzying array of responses.

Despite the nearly endless possibilities for how students evaluate faculty, one possible lens they are using is that of the consumer. Viewed in this manner, the teaching/learning process is equivalent to any other service or commodity that's bought and sold on the open market. Peter Sacks, author of *Generation X Goes to College*, labels his time spent teaching at a community college “a consumeristic, pandering enterprise...The love of learning was completely whitewashed out” (Wilson, 1998, para. 31). Given the premium our consumer culture places on entertainment, it's not surprising that some teachers report a student demand for lectures and discussions sprinkled with drama, or, as Jeremy D. Mayer, a political science professor at Kalamazoo College puts it, “a bit of Quentin Tarantino in the classroom” (Wilson, 1998, para. 33). According to Sacks, a student came right out and said to him, “We want you guys to dance, sing, and cry” (Wilson, 1998, para. 34).

In my own experience, the commodification of learning has manifested itself in student evaluations in a variety of ways, namely through references to “interest” and “usefulness.” The final section of my institution's official SEFs, after the numeric ratings portion, includes open-ended questions including “What was the most beneficial part of this course?”, “What was the least beneficial part of this course?”, and “What improvements would you suggest your instructor make in this course?” Mercifully, I haven't had any students request Tarantino impressions or a song and dance routine, but I do on occasion receive critiques that request more thrills and excitement in the classroom. To a degree, it's reasonable that students expect faculty to prepare a lively lecture or discussion, but there also seems to be an implicit assumption in such comments that all pupils need to do is show up, as if to a performance. With respect to “usefulness,” I've had students make both positive and negative comments. One student commented that my class had been particularly useful; another complained that s/he did not leave every class session with practical skills or information. Unfortunately, no further clarification was offered in either case—or when similar comments have been made—so I've been left trying to piece the puzzle together on my own. My best guess is that students typically measure “usefulness” in terms of the extent to which a course prepares them for a) future courses, b) a career, and/or c) graduate school entrance exams. Recently, a second-semester senior enrolled in my first-year English composition course because she had been dreading a writing intensive course for her previous three years; as the course wrapped up, she informed me she wished she had taken the class much earlier, as it would have helped her in other courses. Her perception of English composition, for sure, is similar to that of many faculty members: the course exists to help students succeed at college-level writing across the board. While I'm by no means opposed to this function of college composition, my concern is that this very strict understanding of “usefulness” rules out possibilities for preparing students for other aims such as active citizenship and social justice.

In addition to the “interest” and “usefulness” issues, one other way I've experienced the commodification of teaching/learning is related to student comments on politics in the classroom. From the very outset of the courses I teach, I explain to students that because a key ingredient in academic writing is the ability to formulate compelling arguments, our class discussion will revolve around respectful, robust debates. I also inform them in advance that on occasion, I will offer up my own convictions to be scrutinized and questioned by the class. Despite these declarations, I receive several comments per year that object to our class forays into the political realm. Under the “least beneficial” and “improvements” queries, a number of students have remarked that my contributions to class discussion were politicized and biased. The built-in assumption here seems to be that the classroom is some kind of “no spin zone,” focused exclusively on pragmatic skill sets. Ironically, as noted above, I make a point of framing our political discussions as good practice for sharpening our argumentative strategies. Nevertheless, at least for the students who complain about these debates, developing informed opinions and thinking critically are too far removed from what's immediately practical. In short, my vision of the classroom as a microcosm of a community teaming with competing views collides with students expecting nothing more than a series of drills-and-skills workshops.

Unfortunately, in many of the above instances, SEFs “have degenerated into consumer-satisfaction surveys” (Lazere, 2009, 531) – functioning more like an online Yelp product/service review than thoughtful, constructive feedback. On that note, many colleges have indeed converted course evaluations to an online format; as early as 2005, a Brigham Young University study approximated that nearly one-third of a “variety of institutions” (Anderson, Brown, Spaeth, 2006, p. 1) had made the leap to online SEFs. The same study acknowledges that there has also been a recent decline in the number of students completing evaluations; however, the researchers assert that the reason for the drop may actually have more to do with the level of student and faculty disengagement from the process (p. 1). Another possible explanation for low numbers could be that when students are satisfied with instructors and subject matter, they see no point in evaluation (Anderson, Cain, Bird, 2005, p. 35). To combat the dwindling rate of students who respond at the institution where I teach, faculty have been encouraged to set aside class time for evaluations. Additionally, it’s been suggested that a random prize drawing might induce more students to participate. The problem, as I see it, with these remedies is that they frame the evaluation process as a chore that’s only worth doing if 1) students are forced to and 2) there’s a material reward. Basically, the commodified version of education is reinforced, and the opportunity for students to provide instructors with meaningful commentary is reduced to what Lazere’s laments as the “customer satisfaction” model. It’s not shocking that he believes course evaluations “should be abolished” (2009, p. 531)

The troubling aspect, though, is not the opportunity that schools provide students to evaluate instructors; rather, it’s the commodified, vocationalized context surrounding them and their “use on salary, promotion, [and] tenure decisions” (Haskell, 1997, p. 2). Arum and Roksa, referencing a late 1980s study conducted by Ernest Boyer, report that a quarter of four-year schools see SEFs as “very important for tenure decisions” (2011, p. 7). It would be interesting to see, in light of formalized online SEFs and commercial sites like Rate My Professor, the extent to which this percentage may have changed in the intervening years. But even if questionable student expectations aren’t impacting faculty through the promotion and tenure process, there are other disturbing possibilities on the horizon. Anderson, Brown, and Spaeth caution that “as various coalitions of constituencies increasingly require educational institutions to post evaluations online in the new learning market, there will be more pressures to reduce the complexity of teaching to simplistic and useless comparisons” (2006, p. 6). In other words, publishing official university SEFs on the Internet—all in the name of transparency and student enfranchisement—may have the unintended consequence of ranking instructors according to who’s giving what students currently demand from a college education.

### **Changing the Conversation**

I’m fortunate to be teaching at an institution where student evaluations are not directly used in decisions regarding reappointment, promotion, and tenure; rather, department chairs summarize SEFs as part of our annual review. Moreover, these summaries do not make references to specific numeric values. This approach to SEFs seems reasonable to me—a general portrait of how students are responding to lectures, discussions, assignments, grading, etc. is provided, and noteworthy patterns in responses are described. Such a policy can, ideally, protect junior faculty from the unjustified barbs and misguided criticisms that can show up in student evaluations. Of course, no system is perfect, as it’s possible for a chairperson to minimize or magnify particular patterns and comments.

For now, such issues are mostly out of my hands and more a matter for collective bargaining. That said, I’ve begun awakening to things I can do, namely, inside the classroom. As a graduate student, I had a mentor who encouraged me to conduct informal midterm evaluations, and then discuss the results in class. The goal was to make student feedback an essential, organic part of the course fabric. Anderson, Cain, and Bird emphasize the importance of integrating this kind of evaluation as part of the architecture of our education system: “Developing a culture of assessment among faculty members and students is crucial for encouraging an atmosphere of openness and willingness to strive together toward improving teaching and learning” (2005, p. 41). Yet, it’s only within the past year that I have reestablished more regular student feedback in my courses. For my first few years after graduate school, I drifted away from this practice,

giving only a quick pep talk at the semester's end, in hopes that students would take the time to complete the official evaluation. It's no wonder that they may have received the impression that the evaluations were not terribly important, similar to dropping a note in the suggestion box at a restaurant or retail store. Now that I've gotten back into the habit of making student feedback a more integral part of my teaching, I also hope to seize the related class discussions as moments to explore where the larger, public conversation is at regarding the purpose of higher education. As just one possibility, I can show students the PBS *Frontline* episode "College, Inc." in which a former University of Phoenix director nonchalantly compares marketing higher learning to advertising perfume (Maggio and Smith, 2010). While the resulting conversations may not result in epiphanies, they may at least provide a starting point for my students and I to articulate and defend our sense of what college should be.

The other battles are taking place beyond college campuses, in our legislative chambers and media outlets. Kirp summarizes the situation into a succinct question:

Can the public be persuaded that universities represent something as ineffable as the common good—more specifically, that higher education contributes to the the development of knowledgeable and responsible citizens, encourages social cohesion, promotes and spreads knowledge, increases social mobility, and stimulates the economy? (2003, p. 263)

While I am ultimately optimistic, I believe it is up to educators to make a compelling, two-part case. Part one is easier than part two: it involves convincing students and parents that an education focused exclusively on specific skills is no longer useful; rather, what is needed today are graduates who can think critically, problem-solve, and adapt. Based on how quickly our current technology is evolving, I can imagine a receptive audience for this argument. The second part will present a much tougher challenge—linking college education to matters of personal development and social justice.

But if the debate to build a more meaningful higher education experience appears daunting, we do have a number of compelling talking points. As history professor and former Air Force colonel William Astore (2009) puts it,

What do torture, a major recession, and two debilitating wars have to do with our educational system? My guess: plenty. These are the three most immediate realities of a system that fails to challenge, or even critique, authority in a meaningful way. (Three Realities of Higher Ed section, para. 1)

I do not know if the emotional and financial pain of war and recession are what it will take to awaken our collective need for a system of higher learning that does more than train people to land jobs and consume products. But I do know that we often learn from our biggest mistakes, so it is quite possible that these glaring problems will mirror to us that it is time to chart a new course. In *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, English professor David Yaffe (2011) wrote a humorous piece hoping that it will be Michael Moore who shows us how far colleges have missed the mark and what needs to be done to get back on track. I would welcome such a documentary, because as much as Moore can have a polarizing effect on his audiences, he certainly can elevate issues rather quickly to a level of public consciousness. Until that movie happens—and for that matter, afterwards—it has become clear that it is up to us as educators to take the fight to our classrooms, campuses, and larger communities.

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## AFFILIATIONS

Sean Murray  
St. John's University