

Teacher harassment and a loss of respect

Thirty-one years ago I retired from teaching physics. Much has changed since then, but on reading the commentary in the March 2020 issue of PHYSICS TODAY (page 10), I was appalled but not surprised to learn that one aspect of teaching has not changed—harassment of teachers. In my era everyone was more civilized than today, so harassment from whining and complaining students was verbal, not physical.

During my 20-year career, I found that the most virulent of the whiners and complainers were the premed and pre-engineering students. They tried to intimidate professors to get the high grades needed to be admitted to their respective professional schools. They implied that professors, not they, would be responsible for their careers.

At the beginning of every course, I explained that I do not give grades. I simply record the grades the students earn. Also, I set rules of classroom decorum and declared that students who remained in my class tacitly agreed to those conditions. Nevertheless, at grade time a few students begged for higher grades. I suspect that behavior has not changed.

One protocol I disliked was written student evaluations of professors (see PHYSICS TODAY, January 2020, page 24). To avoid having grades and those evaluations influence each other, students submitted their evaluations before they received their grades, and professors saw them afterward. I usually received high marks and favorable comments, but some students gave me low scores and wrote insulting remarks. I frequently observed a strong correlation: Students earning low grades often were the ones submitting unfavorable comments.

How can administrators eliminate or reduce harassment of professors? And why do students harass them? I am too far beyond my campus years, so I cannot

answer the first part, except to guess that administrators are overly concerned with political correctness as applied to their sources of income—the students.

As to the second question, our society—students included—has suffered a general breakdown in courtesy. The students' part of that may be because the evolution of classroom attire from proper to casual to relaxed to sloppy promoted sloppy habits and attitudes. And from recent visits to campuses, I noted that many professors emulated their worst-attired students. When professors become too casual, allow or encourage informality with students, and relax discipline, they can lose dignity, prestige, and respect.

To stop harassment of professors, administrators surely should pay more attention to the welfare of their faculty, and professors should dress and act as though they deserve respect from students. That way, they will be more likely to get it.

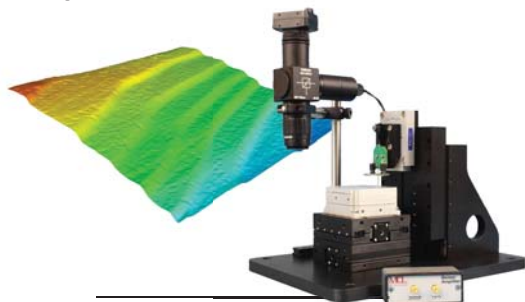
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