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The Impact of "Shopping" Period on Student Learning

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As I write, Fall Semester's "shopping period" is lumbering to its messy close, and even the most unlucky or indecisive students seem to have found places in the courses they need (if not necessarily in the ones they want) to satisfy the University's requirements for fulltime matriculation.

My observation of this peculiar tribal ritual has produced even more ambivalence than usual in me this time around, perhaps because I am teaching two limited-enrollment courses that have experienced an unusual (and unnecessary) amount of turbulence before settling down to learning in earnest. So I can't help thinking that there must be a better way to do this.

Let me say first that I understand and accept many of the arguments for "shopping period": it is part and parcel of the Brown Curriculum, which insists that students take leadership and ownership of their course of study; students who do take such ownership are more likely to be committed to that course of study; and (in a twist that mollifies even some cranky traditionalists) probably 85 percent of Brown students actually end up with transcripts that would meet the distribution requirements of other, comparable institutions that have distribution requirements and other un-Brownian restrictions.

Unfortunately, “shopping period” doesn’t always work as it’s supposed to. Instead, it’s subject to abuse that results in disservice to faculty, students, and the entire learning process at Brown. At minimum, it deprives some students of places in courses that they want and need to take. At worst, it validates the commodification of education itself: students see themselves as consumers or customers, to be wooed, coddled, and provided with instant gratification, rather than as seekers willing to admit that they may not, in fact, fully know their own minds yet, and that their tastes and interests are not yet fully defined and formed.

Not surprisingly, given that we are all enmeshed in a consumer society, our first-year students arrive with their “shoppers’ reflexes” already honed. Graduates of what has rightly been termed “the shopping mall high school” (a description that applies to more than just large public high schools) are attracted to Brown by its lack of curricular restrictions and by the rich variety of courses and other educational experiences we offer. If there are “shopping mall colleges and universities,” Brown may well be the Mall of America.

As proprietor of two boutiques on the mall this fall, I had a lot of foot traffic, and my Departments are happy that I met my quota of customers. But it wasn’t always easy, nor was it always fair, and only now am I able to get around to providing the services (i.e. teaching the classes) the way I think I should. Let me abandon (for a while anyway) the merchandising metaphor and explain why.

One course, a seminar that is required for undergraduates in the Education Department’s Undergraduate Teacher Education Program (UTEP), is theoretically limited to 20 students, although I have sometimes yielded to importuning students and pushed the roster to 24 or so. The great majority of students taking the seminar do not have to be there: most are upperclassmen who are thinking that perhaps they should be considering a teaching career, and they want a course that not only encourages them to read, think, talk, and write about what that means, but also gives them a chance to observe real classrooms and see what life looks like from the other side of the desk. (Students observe teachers in local schools for 4 hours per week, for 8 weeks.)

Students are supposed to get written permission to take the course, but most (despite communications to the contrary) take that to mean that they should bring a blank form to the first class meeting, and even those who get the form signed in advance do not always take this as a commitment to take the course. Pre-registering, of course, means nothing. This fall, although I sent an email before the first class asking students who had pre-registered and then changed their minds to let me know, 40% of those pre-registered

didn't show up. I had received one email. And I still had more students than I could accommodate.

Most of those who did show up cheerfully accepted the priority list for entry into the course (pre-registered students, UTEPs, Ed Studies concentrators, then seniors, juniors, and so on), although several who thought they might be on the borderline made (unsuccessful) heartfelt pleas to be let in ahead of others. By the end of the session, I had my roster, plus a waiting list. I repeated my request that anyone deciding not to take the course should tell me, so I could admit someone from the waiting list (and not go through the time and effort involved in finding a teacher in the appropriate discipline who was willing to be observed by that student).

You can probably guess what's coming: a small handful of students just stopped coming without saying a thing; one told me she was going to decide between this course and another and would let me know by a certain date. When she was late and I tracked her down, she allowed that she was taking the other course.

Overall, the enrollment in this year's seminar is (well, seems to be—we never really know until the end of the semester, do we?) exactly 20. It could have been 23 or 24. But because students didn't get back to me when they changed their minds, a handful of students on the wait list understandably went elsewhere. And at least one local teacher who had agreed to host an observer had to be told apologetically that plans have changed.

The situation is at least as difficult in my first-year seminar, where the deans (upholding a policy I fully support) rigidly enforce a limit of 20. A couple of pre-registered students never showed up or didn't show up after the first class; another student who begged to be allowed in (and got lucky in the draw for the wait list) was admitted, then stopped coming without a word after a couple of class meetings. Enrollment now sits at 19. Somewhere out there is a student from the waiting list who (again, understandably) gave up, but could have gotten a seat.

Now, after two weeks, we reach the part of the semester when I can actually teach the way “best practice” says I should, using activities and projects that involve active learning and participation by the students, individually and in small groups. I can't do this sooner because I can't be sure who's going to show up from one class meeting to the next.

From what I've heard over the years, my experiences here are quite typical of limited-enrollment courses. If they were lecture courses, there would be no problem. Having a few students more or less in a class of 100 doesn't really affect the pedagogy, even if they enter or leave erratically. But as I understand it, Brown wants the world to know—now more than ever—that our teaching takes place primarily in small classes that feature

individual attention and reward active learning. Educational theorists and researchers across the disciplines agree that this kind of teaching is the most effective.

In higher education, unfortunately, our practice too often puts the lie to our words. Putting 200 or 300 fannies in the seats is taken not merely as a sign of popularity, but of quality. Departments are pressured to increase enrollments, but are not given resources to do so by increasing the number of courses. Extracurricular activities—most notably, athletics—cause students to miss classes, and they are encouraged to believe this okay because somebody in class will “get the notes” for them. Students miss class meetings because they’re “shopping” other courses, and some students miss out on a course entirely because somebody drops out late in the game.

Brown’s semester provides only 12 weeks of teaching time. If instructors cannot do what they do best for the first two weeks of a course because they have to wait to find out who’s really in the class, the semester is really even shorter. To put it in consumerist lingo, students aren’t getting what they pay for. If Brown’s commitment to small classes and active learning is to be realized, it’s time to reform “shopping period.”

I have some modest suggestions in this regard:

- 1) Shorten it. Allow a week at most for “shopping period.”
- 2) Encourage faculty to enforce rules about attending class meetings at the beginning of the semester as a condition for enrollment in the class.
- 3) Change the rules so that students are permitted to pre-register for only four courses, not five. Students routinely pre-register for five without having any intention of taking all five. Class rosters at the beginning of the semester are essentially meaningless.
- 4) Change the way we present our curriculum to incoming students. Our presentation must confront the inappropriate expectations of students conditioned to think of themselves as “shoppers,” not students. As “shoppers,” they are responsible only for getting the best deal for themselves; as students, they are part of a learning community and should act accordingly. For one thing, this means that if you decide not to take a course you’ve signed up for, let the instructor know.
- 5) Enlighten the students who are already here. From sophomores to seniors, students delight in gaming the system. I had a Meiklejohn who (only semi-seriously, I want to think) gave our first-years a list of the Top Ten things to say to an Instructor to get admission to a course they hadn’t signed up for. Our advising system—from the day students are admitted, through CAP Advising, and concentration advising—should emphasize the importance of finding out about and planning their courses BEFORE they pre-register. And we should not hesitate to point out that students who take up space for

too long only to leave deprive fellow students of opportunities to take courses they really want to take.

There are undoubtedly other things we could do, too. But, as always, the first step toward solving the problem is recognizing that we have one. If this little rant helps us to achieve that, it will have served its purpose.

Readings related to this topic (available at the Sheridan Center):

Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004).

Mark Edmundson, “On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students,” *Harper’s Magazine* (September 1997).

Arthur Powell, *et al.*, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (1985).