**The Almighty Grade Point Average (GPA) and Consequences**

The game seems to start in high school where students compete for the highest GPA, since many colleges use that measure as one of the admission criteria. This continues onward to college where such items such as scholarship funding, and honors status is dependent on the “Almighty GPA”. As a result of this emphasis, students become more interested in receiving a good grade in classes then learning about the material or even developing their own ideas about science and research. The practice of studying for finals is especially detractive to learning as the educational knowledge seems to disappear right after the final, never to be remembered again. My standard interview question for college graduates: “Did you take calculus?”. The usual answer was “yes, I got an A”. My next question: “What is the integral of ex?”. Some people retained the first bit of information about the subject; most did not. The imaginative answer was “a function of un”. These people received a suggestion to take calculus problems to a mathematically talented fellow employee, and were hired.

The corollary to the importance of the GPA is to never give a D or an F to a college student, especially at an expensive private college. The student has worked hard to get into college, and the college would really like to keep the student there, if only to get tuition money and respect. My attitude is to treat every student as a potential future donor, and to help them find a successful career. If they do not understand the material or have no interest, perhaps they would be better off spending their time on something that they enjoy. When I was teaching biochemistry, several students were in academic trouble in the course. Since this class was a prerequisite for medical school, and most students were very dedicated, the grade curve had to be quite high to allow students to have the deserved chance for admission. The solution for the troubled student was the “Gift C” for attending the class. This meant that they were not qualified to take the next quarter, but did not have to be concerned with the grade and could pursue other interests/problems. Later, several people thanked us for getting them onto a more desirable (for them) academic pathway while keeping them in school.

While I was at Caltech, we started a rating evaluation of the professors teaching undergraduate courses. Before the final, students were asked to fill out a form for each class about the various aspects of the educational process. The survey results were tabulated, and then provided to department chairs that had the responsibility of assigning professors to classes. A modern equivalent is [www.ratemyprofessors.com](http://www.ratemyprofessors.com). Many of the department chairs were quite surprised at the results, and changed their teaching assignments as a result of the survey. There were some symbolic awards for highly rated teachers from techers (students at Caltech).

In the 1960’s, Caltech economics professor Alan Sweezy was called “Easy Sweezy”, due to the prevalence of high grades. Perhaps the attitude there was that the class material was so important to the student’s later economic well-being, that the student should be interested in learning about the subject. Actually, this is true for most subjects in college. It is far more important to assimilate and enjoy the material, then to get the best possible grade. Personally, I was interested in taking as many classes as possible while I was at Caltech just to interact and learn from the brilliant professors there. I graduated with a large surplus of class credits.

**So what is the significance of the GPA?**

The short answer is that the day most students graduate from Caltech, the GPA will be forgotten, never to be mentioned again. It might be useful before then to get that first job, or to go to graduate school, but afterwards, most positions in life are based upon who you are, what you know, your experience, and your dedication level.

This is fortunate, since in my case, the Caltech GPA was completely ruined by the two grades of D and F that I received from two chemistry courses. I really wanted to graduate with Honors, which was a 3.25 on an A=4, B=3 scale. Those two grades reduced my GPA to below that level, so I did not graduate with Honors. On my application for graduate school at Northwestern, the admissions group was afraid that I had lost interest in chemistry, and therefore should not be admitted. They then sensibly questioned some professors of Caltech to find out if that was the case, and found that those grades were an aberration. I was thinking of applying to Harvard for graduate work, but one Caltech professor said he would “eat his shirt” if I was accepted.

However, there is a hidden consequence from my college GPA. I felt unfairly treated by the university, and have not contributed and will not contribute to the alumni fund. I am proud to have been at Caltech, and I participate in several alumni activities, but I find that a university that mistreats students is not worthy of financial support. Besides, I paid the tuition fee to go there. Since graduation, I have met many students from Caltech who still have nightmares about the student experience there and share my opinion about contributions.