

P. Aarne Vesilind's Commentary on "The Hardware Lab"

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The Hardware Lab

The educational system, since the days of the Greek *skholē*, has been organized around a simple plan: The student is to be helped with seeking out knowledge and is expected to work hard at learning this knowledge, and then the student is tested to ascertain the level of achievement. The modern university is no different, although corrupting influences threaten to turn our large public institutions of higher learning into circuses and beer drinking spas. Sperber, Murray. *Beer and Circus: How Big Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education*. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

The faculty at most universities steadfastly continue to support a system that has proven to be most effective and productive: a system of meritocracy - a system in which success comes from achieving certain norms and skills. It is strict adherence to this principle that has made the American university the envy of the world.

While a system based on merit seems an obvious choice for a university, we have seen many universities and many social systems where that was not true. Even today, for example, in some universities, it is common practice to cheat on examinations. A recent incident at Bangladesh demonstrates that the merit system is not universal. Apparently friends and parents traditionally stood outside the windows where students were taking a test and helped them with the answers. A riot ensued when the faculty closed the windows, thus preventing the blatant cheating. In other countries, one's connection to political parties or powerful people ensured graduation. In the former Soviet Union, for example, entrance to the university was not determined by merit, but rather depended on one's parents' participation in the Communist Party. Even in the United States, some schools, such as a small private college in South Carolina, ignore all appeals by faculty to curb cheating and routinely side with tuition-paying students. As a result, faculty give up on trying to attain some semblance of academic integrity in their courses and allow students to cheat as much as they wish.

Students and faculty at most universities understand that a system where cheating is condoned is not the system they want for their university. Witness the recent demonstration at Howard University, where students protested the faculty's apparent laxity in enforcing academic integrity guidelines. The only way students can be proud of their university and their degree is to know that they worked hard for this certification. The desire to make a university a merit-based organization designed for the common good is a commendable moral goal.

However, this moral goal unfortunately sometimes conflicts directly with another moral concern - providing unequal assistance to the disadvantaged. Ever since John Rawls' arguments in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971. our American society has agreed that it is morally permissible, and indeed necessary, to give preference to those with the least ability to achieve the good life. Rawls' "veil of ignorance" asks us to propose unequal treatment for those who will enter life with the least talents or the least raw material, lacking social, economic or physical advantages. Thus we now have affirmative action, giving certain persons with identifiable traits such as racial ancestry preference in jobs, education and other social goods. In the universities, we have extended this unequal advantage to students with identifiable learning disabilities such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder (ADD). In college, these students are diagnosed as either having or not having a learning disability and, once positively diagnosed, are given certain advantages.

Unfortunately, what is not recognized is that all of these disabilities are present in all students to a certain degree. Some students have great difficulty in focusing on a lesson, but through sheer determination and willpower overcome this problem. Other students might have sleeping disorders and figure out various tricks to stay awake. These students persevere and succeed in a world where they have been given the short straw.

But other students in college find that they have difficulty mastering the material or keeping up with the work and seek assistance from psychological services. Through various tests, these students may be diagnosed as having various learning disabilities (LD). But having learning disabilities is not a black/white, off/on condition. Having some form of LD is not like being pregnant, where you either are or you aren't - there is no middle ground. In LD there is a continuum, with all students having some signs of all identifiable disabilities.

In this case study, Mike has been diagnosed as having some form of LD (unspecified) and has been given a special-learning waiver. This waiver simply means that Mike is to have an advantage over all other students. If the skill to be tested is a hands-on laboratory exam and a written report, as in this scenario, then Mike apparently believes, and Laurie, the TA, apparently agrees, is that his waiver allows him to have extra time. But it seems that Mike has also been blowing off the hands-on lab procedures, which apparently have nothing to do with his learning disability. Mike has played up this diagnosed disability in his own mind and now thinks of himself as a victim. Because he has a disability, he has an excellent excuse for not completing the lab, and he makes no attempt to do so. He does not read up on the procedures and does not even bother to e-mail Laurie with questions. He is convinced that he is simply not able to do the work in the same time and at the same rate as other students because of his disability. Mike is hiding behind this diagnosis to excuse himself from doing any work and is now asking Laurie and the professor to have pity on him.

There is no ethical quandary here. Laurie has done everything in her power to help Mike, and the rest is up to him. The sooner someone explains this fact to Mike, the more likely he is to pull himself together and get to work.