

Professor believes stand on grades nearly cost him tenure

by Philip Walzer
The Virginian-Pilot

Robert H. Holden's freshman history course "Latin America in a World Setting" had the lowest average grade of any liberal-arts class at Old Dominion University last school year. It was 1.1, barely above a "D."

In one course section, 16 of 21 students failed. That's much higher than his usual failure rate, but Holden said he had no choice. "The students were just not prepared for this course," he said. "If 75 percent earned an F, they had to get an F. It would have been dishonest to give them anything else."

But his uncompromising views on grading, Holden believes, almost doomed his shot at tenure in 1999. Tenure virtually guarantees lifelong job security at a college.

A faculty committee from the College of Arts and Letters, in a 5-4 vote, recommended against granting Holden tenure, saying his "teaching style has not meshed with student expectations." But the committee's recommendation was overruled by his dean and the university's provost.

As Holden sees it, his experience is a cautionary tale for professors worried that tough grading will trigger harmful student reviews and hurt their careers. Holden said he took a big risk. "I decided when I got here that I would not be changed by the student evaluation process."

Holden provided copies of the recommendations from the faculty committee, dean and provost. The committee called his "research output" impressive, but cited "consistently low to average" student evaluations.

Though the panel called Holden "a devoted teacher," it said: "His efforts to improve do not seem to have resulted in higher levels of student satisfaction . . . He does not seem to have yet developed techniques of positive reinforcement that help students achieve those high standards."

The dean, Karen L. Gould, and provost, Jo Ann Gora, voiced a different opinion in their reviews. Yes, Holden got low scores his first year at ODU. But since then, his average scores on student reviews ranged from 4.2 to 5.9 on a 6-point scale.

Recent negative comments, Gould wrote, came from students in lower-level classes complaining about "heavy reading assignments and Dr. Holden's high grading standards." Other underclassmen seemed to "appreciate being challenged," and advanced undergraduates and graduate students were "virtually unanimous in their enthusiasm."

Gora wrote: "I applaud the rigor of his requirements."

Both noted that Holden's chairman also had recommended him for tenure.

Lea Lukic, a freshman from York County, took Holden's class last fall. She said Holden made the midterm "as hard as possible." She got a C on it. He's "a good teacher who knows his information," but "he could loosen up."

Gould, now a dean at the University of Cincinnati, declined to comment on Holden's case. However, she disputed the notion that low grading usually translates into low student reviews.

At least two studies, though, give credence to Holden's fears. In 1984, two economists found that "easier grading is positively correlated with teaching evaluations." In 1998-99, Valen Johnson and his colleagues at Duke University surveyed 1,900 students before and after their final grades.

Most who did not get the grade they expected lowered their evaluations, said Johnson, now at the University of Michigan. Those who got higher grades than expected improved their reviews.

Holden, now tenured, received no flak last year for the high failure rate of his students. Still, he believes his approach poses risks. "Professors get the message very quickly that their main job is to please students," Holden said.

Heavy hitters line up for support in affirmative action case

by Maryanne George
Knight Ridder Newspapers

An army of educators, politicians, corporation presidents and universities will unveil legal briefs supporting the University of Michigan's race-conscious admissions policies Monday in Washington, D.C.

The list of supporters includes heavy hitters such as General Motors Corp., IBM, Microsoft Corp., Steelcase Inc., the American Bar Association, the AFL-CIO and universities such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia and Cornell.

The University of Michigan also will release its own legal brief Monday.

More than 60 briefs signed by more than 300 organizations will be filed with the U.S. Supreme Court by midnight Tuesday.

The court will hear arguments April 1 in two landmark cases filed in 1997 against the University of Michigan by three white students who claim they were denied admission in favor of less-qualified minorities. The court will issue a ruling by June that will affect college admissions throughout the country.

The briefs supporting the University of Michigan will be disclosed Monday at the American Council on Education's annual meeting in Washington. Beforehand, university President Mary Sue Coleman will be the keynote speaker at a luncheon at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. David DeBruin, a Washington attorney, said more than 60 of the nation's largest corporations will file a joint brief to voice their opinion on the value of diversity.

"These are global companies that deal with people of diverse cultures, backgrounds and ideas," DeBruin, who is preparing the brief, said Friday. "It is very important to them to be able to hire a diverse work force of employees trained in an academic environment that has exposed them to diverse cultures. They share the sense of importance of what U-M is trying to do."

Sheldon Steinbach, the education council's general counsel, said his group, which represents 1,800 colleges nationally, will file a brief signed by about 40 educational organizations.

"The ability to use race as a plus factor in admissions is critical to achieving a diverse student body that is vital to the educational process," Steinbach said. "Other solutions don't work or succeed, because of the continuation of segregated schools."

Last month, President Bush criticized the University of Michigan's policies as quotas. He said other methods could achieve diversity, such as those used in Texas, California and Florida that guarantee a spot at state universities to students who graduate in the top tiers of their class. U.S. Solicitor General Ted Olson filed a brief on Bush's behalf last month, bringing the total filings of opposition groups to about 20.

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