

Breakthrough Solution #2: Recognize and Reward Extraordinary Teachers

The Goal

Breakthrough Solution #2 will offer voluntary cash bonuses to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching on college and university campuses and attract the best teachers.

Bonuses will be widespread, significant and based on how well a course delivers on its learning objectives.

Since up to 25% of the faculty each semester will receive a teaching bonus, every faculty member will have an incentive to improve his or her teaching skills. The top awards will be up to \$10,000 a class, so once a teacher receives a lower-level bonus, there will be a strong incentive to continue to improve.

Basing bonuses on how well students judge that a course delivered on its promises will encourage faculty to be as explicit as possible about the learning objectives for each course, making it easier for administrators to judge the effectiveness of the curriculum and coordinate class offerings.

Finally, since the bonuses depend not only on the quality of teaching but on the number of students taught, the best teachers will have an incentive to teach even more students.

Notes

Carrying Out the Reform

This reform would provide a voluntary bonus system based on customer (student) feedback, to reward the most effective and efficient teachers and encourage the entire faculty to improve its teaching skills.

1. *The reform would use existing evaluation forms.*

The bonus plan would be easy to implement. Students would use the existing teaching evaluation forms to judge how effectively a class delivered on its promises. The teachers of classes ranked in the top 25% each semester would be eligible for an award.

2. *The awards would be up to \$10,000 per class.*

Teachers whose classes were rated in the top 3% of all classes would receive up to \$10,000, depending on the number of students taught. Teachers of classes rated from the top 10% to the top 3% would receive up to \$5,000 per class and teachers rated between the top 25% and the top 10% would receive up to \$2,500 per class. Teachers in the lower award categories would have an incentive to do an even better job teaching the next semester, to earn even larger bonuses.

3. *Bonuses would encourage the best teachers to teach more students.*

Awards would be based on the ratings of each class *and* the number of students taught, so excellent teachers would be encouraged to teach as many classes and students as possible.

4. *The awards would be voluntary.*

The awards would be voluntary, so faculty who objected to incentive pay could refuse the bonus with no harm done to anyone.

5. *Bonuses could help curb grade inflation.*

If the faculty is concerned that relying on customer (student) satisfaction ratings would result in a “popularity contest,” voluntary maximum limits on the number of A’s and B’s awarded in each class could be included in the bonus plan, which would have the added benefit of curbing grade inflation.

6. *All teachers would be eligible for the bonuses.*

Adjuncts, teaching assistants or tenure / tenure track faculty – all teachers – would all be eligible to participate in the bonus program. Since many non-tenured teachers make as little as \$10 an hour, the incentive effects would be strong, likely strong enough to draw more excellent teachers to colleges and universities. Since on many campuses these non-tenured faculty teach the majority of students, the effects on teaching efficiency could be significant.

7. The program is likely to pay for itself through efficiency gains.

Since the largest awards are limited to the top 3% of the classes, the overall cost of the bonus program would be quite low, approximately 6% of payroll if all faculty participated. The increased efficiency from having the best teachers teach more students is likely to mean that the bonus plan will save money in the long run, even considering the cost of the bonuses.

8. Awards will be given in a college-wide ceremony each semester and results would be posted publicly.

Honoring and rewarding the best teachers could have a significant impact on the perceived value of teachers on college and university campuses.

Possible Objections

1. Are student evaluations merely a “popularity contest”?

Often tenured faculty will object to being measured based on customer (student) satisfaction, claiming that such ratings are merely “popularity contests.”

Extensive research shows that teachers who communicate well are more effective teachers. Research also shows that students, an increasing number of whom are adults, are capable of judging teaching effectiveness, especially when the deliverables for a class are clearly stated.

Finally, since students and the teacher are the only people in the classroom, the only substitute for customer (student) feedback is to allow the faculty to rate itself, an alternative with serious conflict of interest problems.

Research does show that students will rate a teacher who gives all A's slightly higher than a teacher with a more difficult grading curve. To eliminate this concern, any teacher who volunteered to participate in the bonus program could be asked to limit the maximum number of A's and B's awarded.

2. *Shouldn't customer satisfaction ratings be adjusted for other factors, like the amount of reading or the quality of the course?*

Some will suggest various measures and numerous faculty committees to adjust customer (student) satisfaction ratings until they provide outcomes that are more palatable to the tenured faculty. This should be avoided at all costs.

The purpose of this program is to recognize, reward and encourage excellent teaching. Thus any non-teaching criteria, such as research, committee work or service work, are not germane to determining the awards.

Course difficulty is not relevant because every course should be challenging to students and force them to learn and stretch. A 101 intro to literature course shouldn't be any "easier" for a freshman than an advanced 401 physics course for a senior physics major – both should require students to learn and grow and stretch based on the base of knowledge they bring to the course.

3. *Shouldn't only tenured and tenure track faculty be eligible for the awards?*

Adjunct and non-tenure track faculty now account for 70% of faculty at America's colleges and universities and teach the majority of students. Excluding teaching assistants, adjuncts and other non-tenured / tenure track teachers would be to exclude from awards those who are teaching the majority of students.

4. *Doesn't this only focus on teaching and ignore research, which is inextricably tied to good teaching?*

Kenneth A. Feldman, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, reviewed and analyzed forty-two separate studies, conducted over twenty years, on the relationship between the research productivity of professors and their effectiveness as teachers. The consensus of these forty-two studies was stark and simple: "there was not a clearly discernible relationship between research productivity and teaching skill."ⁱ

ⁱ Anderson, Martin, *Imposters in the Temple: A Blueprint for Improving Higher Education in America*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press (1996) 117