

The Justice Academy Journal

Law and Justice Executive Series

February 2017 - Volume 3



Social Promotions and For-Profit Higher Education

A Professor's View of Troubling Trends

Social promotions, or the act of promoting or passing a student who has not met the academic requirements of the classroom, has been a part of primary and secondary education vocabulary and practices for decades. Interestingly enough, even though it's a known practice in primary and secondary education, there are no accurate figures regarding how many students are promoted to the next grade level each year, primarily due to the fact few school systems want to admit to using the practice of social promotions to move students to the next grade (Education Week, 2004). This does not mean that there have been no past attempts to measure social promotions, but there are not very many studies looking at this topic in the literature. One such study, the 1996 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, indicated that approximately 17 percent of high school seniors had repeated at least one grade since kindergarten, with the most repeated grades occurring from kindergarten through the second grade.

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While this measurement may be useful for informing us of the number of possible social promotions, it is rather weak when we attempt to ascertain exactly why the practice still seems to persist today in our primary and secondary schools. Even more importantly and specific to our review of the issue of social promotions, this author found no attempts to measure how often the use of social promotions has been used in higher education. Unfortunately, due to this lack of data we can only speculate that some of the failure to track the number of social promotions has to do with higher education's focus on pleasing its "customer base" (students) by passing failing students to the next level of classes and what we think may be its prime business focus, the attainment of a positive revenue stream from both public and private sources to keep the "business" of education intact.

What is especially troubling regarding the process of social promotions in higher education is that some higher education organizations may see (or come to accept) this practice as a normal part of their educational practices. While this practice should be a concern regarding any class it is especially relevant to certain classes that build upon a student's knowledge, skills, and abilities, such as math or statistics classes, which often build competence or a skill set as the student progresses from one level to the next

(beginner, intermediate, advanced, etc.). Although no one really knows for sure why a higher education organization would see it in their best interests to socially promote someone, since there is a loss of sufficient data to evaluate, we can only offer speculation as to the reasons this practice seems acceptable and practiced in higher education today. Reasoning that comes to mind anecdotally are first because a study of who is getting socially promoted and why in an institution of higher learning might bring a laser like focus on this practice by the accrediting agencies of those higher educational institutions, resulting in a possible eventual loss of accreditation by the organization or the institution being placed on academic probation. Second, it may also be that the resultant negative reviews the higher education organization may get in the public arena results in the loss of revenue by the university's inability to attract new students to the institution due to a bad reputation in the public eye.

A question for us to explore next is just exactly why and how social promotion is occurring in our institutions of higher learning. In the primary and secondary school levels, the manner in which these social promotions usually happens is by passing an otherwise failing student to the next grade level.

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However, in higher education this process is more focused on one or more specific classes, or passing someone to the next higher level classes that are a part of the student's education plan, and it is not focused on a simple grade level, as are the primary and secondary schools. At this point in the discussion one might rightly ask specifically how is the social promotions process occurring in higher education classes. It is this author's opinion that the primary manner in which social promotions are being accomplished in higher education is twofold. First is through what I would term the reduction of expectations of classroom curriculum and second may be by lowering expectations for student success in the classroom. Having instructed for a number of for-profit universities in the past and after countless discussions I have had with other professors in higher education, I found these appear to be the two primary reasons for higher education social promotions (but admittedly, there could be other reasons as well). Today it often appears to those involved in the business of teaching classes at the higher education level that lowered student performance expectations and poor curriculum seem to be the practice and not the exception in many of our for-profit universities.

Next, let's briefly discuss how a university (through expectations of the classroom instructors/professors) lowers the expectations and requirements for the curriculum in the classroom. I can offer one quick example from my own personal experience instructing at a large for profit online university, where recently I was instructed by the dean to provide what was termed "library guides" for one of the classes that I instruct. The rationalization given for this action was that the university intended to discontinue the text book for my class and instead wanted to start using something they called library guides (which are basically links to pertinent materials we might find online) as a text replacement strategy. One of the reasons I was given for such a change was that the university had discovered (how they discovered, I might add, was not provided) far too many students in the university were not reading their assigned textbooks. Secondly, I was also advised this new approach would be more student friendly for today's online students, who are more computer savvy and would surely approve of this method of learning over reading a boring (my words here) old textbook (even though the textbook in use was online already). So, instead of insisting that students engage the textbook for the course we are now going to be requiring less effort by the student, all with the anticipation of keeping students engaged in the classroom, and perhaps more importantly, enrolled in the university. This last point should not be ignored, as higher educational organizations are, after all, businesses and have a vested interest in keeping students enrolled (the business aspect) to keep the money stream current.

The next issue to explore is the setting of low expectations for students by the university, which in effect encourages lowered classroom expectations by changing requirements for assignments that students must successfully complete for a class (example: discussion boards, individual and group projects, etc.). A good example of this can also be provided from my own personal experience with several of the online institutions I have been employed with for the last 13 years. While the specific institutions will remain nameless, the efforts that were taken by the university administration was to try and push more students through the classes was almost humorous at first glance, except the university administrator was not jesting when he declared the university would no longer require students to provide outside resources to support their work on the discussion boards. So in essence the discussion board assignments were to become more "opinion boards" rather than being used as a tool for learning and engagement of appropriate learning materials by the students. "I think" would now be the new standard as an appropriate and acceptable answer to questions posed in the classroom discussion board.

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In other words, we would no longer be requiring students to know fact from fiction and to engage the literature before responding on the DB, a sort of anything goes mentality now replaces real effort and learning in the classroom.

In closing, it is this writer's opinion that while we are not utilizing the term social promotions to explain the current focus of online higher education, we are still practicing social promotions by the two methods that were briefly discussed - the dumbing down of classroom materials and the setting of low or lowered expectations in the classroom and students by the university. I am troubled that this trend towards mediocrity and acceptance of lowered expectations, which seems only to be increasing today in the online environment. Unfortunately, I have also witnessed very little concern expressed by countless for profit online universities, or the profession itself, about the eventual consequences of their actions (and inactions). I think both students and our profession deserve our very best efforts to try and improve the lot of those students whom we have the privilege to teach. However, as professors/instructors, we alone cannot accomplish this objective, but we must have the backing and support of the university proper. We must also, as professors, students, and professionals in our chosen fields of study, hold the university accountable for its efforts, or lack thereof, to address the problem of social promotions in our for-profit universities.

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