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Best & Worst Teaching

Having attended three different schools during my time in college, I have had a wide range of experiences through which I have come to understand what differentiates good teaching from bad. Of particular note on the negative side is my first semester of college, which I spent at UIC. All of my courses were held in enormous lecture halls, and rarely did the professors depart from the structure of spending the entire class period lecturing. They did not ask the students any questions, nor did the students ask them anything. This approach was entirely impersonal, and thus lacked any sort of adaptability for the needs of an individual student. It felt stifling, to have burning questions that I could not ask until the end of the lecture, when I knew I would be the only one to hear the answer. Professors would rush off after lecturing, giving students only a few moments to catch them and request clarification on anything. Furthermore, the professor would divert most issues to the teaching assistants, who were rarely well-equipped to attend to their duties.

Upon transferring from UIC to Truman College (one of the City Colleges of Chicago), I was pleasantly surprised with the level of freedom given to professors and students to conduct class as they pleased. My class sizes were much smaller (typically no more than two dozen students, often fewer), which allowed for much more interaction with the instructors. Additionally, there were no teaching assistant positions, which meant the professor had to deal with all student issues personally. Despite the institution as a whole being chronically underfunded, it still managed to cater to the multifarious needs of its diverse student body. That is not to say all of my professors were exceptionally talented teachers, but the much closer dynamic between students and instructors more than made up for that.

Although my experience at IIT has been largely positive, there are a few instances in which I have felt as though my professors were not living up to the standard of the school. One very technical class was conducted in a manner similar to my courses at UIC, and focused far more on memorization than any meaningful concepts. Not all of my professors have been very reliable in maintaining open communication with students when outside of class (via email or other electronic means).

These few issues aside, however, I can say with certainty that the best teaching I have received has been here at IIT. Even in several online courses I took, in which most of the content is delivered by prerecorded lectures, the professors have gone to great lengths to help struggling students and provide frequent feedback. Most subjects I have delved into have been taught as conceptual frameworks, rather than formulaic or rote learning. Work that is assigned has been carefully crafted to enforce vital skills and test understanding, without devolving into mindless tedium for those who have been keeping up. Course expectations have been reasonable, but are never set low.

Willingness to spend time helping students has a clear correlation with professors whom I hold in high regard. Furthermore, I have always learned more from professors who do not use a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and instead present the course material in a variety of ways, mixing hands-on work with instruction and review. Taken as a whole, these experiences have taught me that the best teaching is rooted as much in commitment to students as it is in mere technical mastery of a subject.