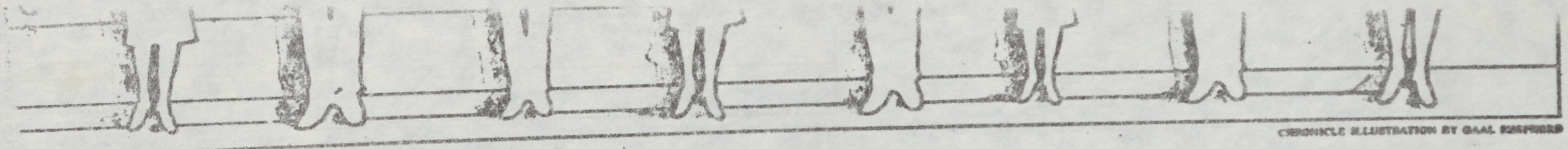

CHRONICLE ILLUSTRATION BY GAAL KINSFORD

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By Paul Rice

AS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN 20 years ago, I attended an orientation session at which the dean of students, with no small amount of pride, asked us to contemplate the fact that, on the average, in four years the two students on our right and the two on the left would no longer be enrolled. A year or so later at the same institution, I had a problem with an instructor, a man I now know to have been the worst college teacher I ever had. I complained to the dean and was told that if I didn't like it there, I was free to go to another college anytime I wished.

Things have changed.

The colleges and universities now want to retain the student in the middle *and* the ones to the right and left. In fact, they have to have them, as many as will stay. Those institutions that can't persuade them to stay may well have to close their doors.

In recent years, the law of supply and demand has forced colleges and universities to give students more influence in the hiring, rehiring, and tenuring of the faculty, a group already beset by complex problems aplenty in the bearish job market.

One way to keep students happy (and enrolled) is to give them a hand in the university's decision-making process—hence the practice of having students evaluate faculty members. At first, at many colleges, it was an exercise in form, designed to make the students feel a part of things—the evaluation sheets were handed out, taken up, and thrown away.

That, too, has changed. Administrators are now using student evaluations as a serious part of overall faculty-evaluation procedures, with all the problems attendant to trying to reduce something as complex as teaching to a numerical quantity.

After squabbling about faculty evaluations for years, our university finally adopted a five-item form giving students an opportunity to rate a faculty member on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being perfectly "poor" and 5 perfectly "excellent."

The occasion of my own evaluation prompted me to undertake the following little study. I understand the stringencies of good experiment design, and I do not call this an experiment. But, despite its shortcomings, its results were interesting.

I chose a particularly likable section of freshman composition containing 15 students, 5 men and 10 women, all just out of high school. On a Wednesday near the end of the semester, I walked into the classroom and brusquely handed back an out-of-class essay on which they had done rather badly. I chided them on their apparent lack of effort. Next, I handed out the evaluation forms and told them it was their chance to get even. Following are the point averages I ran up on this administration of the survey:

	Rating
Clear and comprehensible presentation of material	4.07
Interesting and stimulating presentation of material	4.07
Conscientious preparation for teaching responsibilities	4.07
Approachability and willingness to help in academic matters	3.21
Overall effectiveness as a teacher	4.29
Overall average	3.94

A week later, I strolled into the same class. I was sunny of disposition; I joked with them. I told them what a great class they had been (which was true) and how much I had enjoyed teaching them (also true). I said that I was a little disappointed that so few of them had taken advantage of my generous office hours, but that I stood ready to help them for the rest of their college careers (true still). Oh, and by the way, I had misplaced those faculty-evaluation surveys and would they be so kind as to do them again?

That administration of the evaluation survey gave these results:

	Rating	Change
Clear and comprehensible presentation of material	4.36	+ 7.1%
Interesting and stimulating presentation of material	4.78	+17.4%
Conscientious preparation for teaching responsibilities	4.57	+12.3%
Approachability and willingness to help in academic matters	4.71	+46.7%
Overall effectiveness as a teacher	4.57	+ 6.4%
Overall average	4.60	+16.8%

OF COURSE, I had expected the ratings to increase—especially on the fourth item, since I had tailored my presentation to improve the low marks I had received on it the first time around. But I improved on *all* of them—by nearly 17 per cent on the overall survey and by over 46 per cent on the one item—simply by altering the circumstances of the survey's administration.

Now, I hesitate on the basis of so small a study to draw any public conclusions, but I have some that I am keeping to myself. A few of them ought to be apparent to those administrators who rely heavily on student evaluations to rehire, fire, and promote faculty members, and likewise to those instructors interested in their own welfare, especially in times like these.

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