

Sections by Merit and Progress

During the three years that I taught English at West Point there was great stress on grouping cadets by their relative grades - their merit in the subject - and assigning them and the instructors by such merit. All plebes were arranged into "Sections" 1 to whatever, with no more than 10-12 cadet-students per section, therefore per classroom.

In English, part of the purpose was to insure that plebes who were struggling to master expository writing - the core competence they simply had to master to an acceptable level - were grouped together in the 'lower' numbered sections, and their officer-instructor spent correspondingly more class time, writing assignments, rewriting graded papers time, and where needed 'coaching' time even outside class.

While cadets with greater aptitude - or having benefitted from better undergraduate education, tended to be grouped together, and their instructors could dwell on the more advanced skills of writing and studying superior samples of composition.

Coaching Goats

Those cadets, whatever the subject, were called either 'goats' - lower graded work - or 'hives' - brightest and most academically successful. While there has been a

long tradition of cadets coaching other cadets - whether 'hive' roommates or others who, often to keep promising 'goat' athletes at the Academy whose collegiate team sports potential is greater than his academic ability - officer instructors - as a matter of self-determined duty sometimes spent large amounts of time coaching such cadets, irrespective of their other potential value to the academy.

West Point is one of the rare 'colleges' where professional officer-instructors spend large amounts of time individually tutoring on their 'own' time and without being compelled to by Department Heads - so long as that cadet shows a real determination to 'make it' through West Point and graduate.

Mindful of the subjects I struggled with as a Cadet, while excelling in English, I felt a strong obligation to help -coach - deficient cadets who were 'Turned Out' which meant that they were compelled to take a special Examination a week or later from the end of the Term in which they were below the grades required to continue on. If they passed that 'Turn Out' exam (normally graded by a different instructor - to retain objective standards to be demonstrated) they simply went on. Fail and they were expelled.

I worked with one such plebe during his nominal Christmas Leave (and mine) after he had been 'turned

out' in English. Going to an open classroom, grading the paper I required of him, making him do it over and over and over. Doing everything I could to get his writing coherent. I even visited him in his barracks room where his two classmates were present. In short, I went all out for him while never giving him the slightest slack in his written papers. He had to prove his ability or fail.

It worked. He passed the 'turn-out exam.' He could continue to attend the academy and move on in his studies.

Payback

I never even remembered his name as he and I went on, in 1955. I continuing to teach for two more years at West Point.

To my astonishment, 44 years later, 30 years after I had retired from active service, when I was Nominated in 2004 by a group of graduates to be made a 'Distinguished West Point Graduate' I saw that this same struggling plebe, who went on to graduate, serve a full Army career contributed his voice to my nomination.

He wrote a long, and impassioned endorsement of my nomination on the basis that I typified what it means to be a 'West Pointer' including giving a damn how the lowest ranking cadet or soldier fares.

His letter was included in the final record of that successful nomination. He ended with:

"After writing four published books, several published articles, and after having my ability to present complex ideas in writing noted as one of my unique skills on twenty-five years of officer efficiency reports, I am concerned that if Dave Hughes were to read this, he would take out his **red pen**.

Court Prisk USMA 1959"

He was right. But that incident typified how we, not just me, as West Point graduate instructors, took our job very seriously - with our focus on cadet academic progress, not on our academic accomplishments, or publishing, or academic promotion. And my combat record had nothing to do with the interaction between Cadet Prisk and Captain Hughes. It was all a matter of his learning to write, and write well if he was to become a commissioned officer in the United States Army.

The West Point Academic way.