

## Benedict policy designed to boost student learning



**David Swinton**

Guest Columnist

Wednesday's editorial in The State regarding Benedict's Success Equals Effort policy revealed a superficial understanding of the policy by the writers and an equally inadequate understanding of accreditation and its requirements.

The policy is designed to maximize student efforts toward knowledge acquisition. It is based on a simple proposition: Learning requires effort by the teacher at providing adequate instruction and efforts by the students in engaging effective learning activities. If students do not engage in effective learning activities in and out of the classroom, then learning does not occur. Effort is the most important student input into the learning process.

Under the policy, departments and their faculties are free to develop their own measurement precepts for effort. However, they all include attendance and punctuality, completion of assignments and homework, class participation, taking all exams and participation in group or independent study sessions. Effort is demanding, and most students do not make an "A" in effort.

Many disadvantaged students have not learned to believe in the efficacy of their own efforts. Their earlier lack of success in the schools of this nation has not developed in them the habits of study and persistence that are essential to college success. When they experience the initial shock that results from their inadequate preparation upon enrollment, they give up trying before their breakthroughs come. The policy is designed to assure them that making maximum efforts will pay off and, thereby, encourages them to persist to the end despite any early setbacks.

If students do not exert effort through attentive listening, studying, practicing, thinking, reviewing, discussing and applying the information presented, then no learning occurs. Although it may not be true that effort guarantees learning, it is absolutely true that learning cannot occur without effort.

I cannot fathom the twisted logic that concludes that the policy will result in a reduction in learning at Benedict College. By any logic, one must agree that there is a positive association between efforts at knowledge acquisition and the amount of knowledge acquired. Therefore, logically, the only way that knowledge acquisition can go under this policy is up. If a student does not exert 100 percent effort, i.e. get an "A" for the effort grade, then the student cannot derive the benefit of a satisfactory grade from the policy.

While critics of the policy focus on the exceptional student who earns an "A" in effort and learns nothing, they miss seeing the truth for the overwhelming majority of students; namely, that the typical student will learn more than a satisfactory amount of course content if instruction is competent and if he attains an "A" in effort.

Moreover, because the policy increases student accountability and places more responsibility for the course grade on the student, it should result in a reduction of any incentive for faculty to water down lessons. The principal reason that faculty may lower course content is they feel responsible for their students' failing grades and are held accountable for a high percentage of failures in their class. The Success Equals Effort policy makes the student responsible for any failing grades, liberating the faculty to implement rigorous content instruction. Students will no longer be able to complain that it is the faculty's fault if they fail.

It is hard to comprehend the reasoning that concludes that the policy will dilute the meaning of the Benedict College degree. The 60-40 grade ratio only applies to freshman courses. Moreover, if a student earned an "A" in effort and did not gain a satisfactory knowledge grade, the maximum grade that the student could receive is a "C." Now although it apparently is not well-known to the editorial writers, a "C" is the minimum satisfactory grade in college. Thus, the assignment of this grade does not send a strong message about academic performance.

Moreover, the degree is granted based on performance across four years, and the policy phases out starting in the sophomore year, when the maximum grade that can be earned with an "A" in effort and a failing content grade is "D." After the sophomore year, the policy no longer applies.

Benedict College has chosen to be innovative and proactive in attempting to deal with a long-standing and persistent social problem. We, of course, expect the policy to pay important dividends in increased student learning. In our opinion, the policy is perfectly in harmony with accreditation requirements. Accreditation is not concerned with grading policies in individual courses, but is more concerned with student outcomes for the program as a whole.

The college will continually monitor and evaluate this policy to make sure that it has a positive impact on learning. We are sure that there will be adjustments to it as it is refined through implementation. We hope those of goodwill will withhold judgment while the policy is perfected and fully implemented and until the results are fully evaluated.

We fully expect the Success Equals Effort policy to result in measurable gains in knowledge, retention rates and graduation rates. It will help us increase the supply of well-trained and disciplined citizens for our community and our nation, and it will make an important contribution to resolving the long-standing and increasing educational attainment gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged Americans.

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