*Argument 8*

*The following appeared in a memorandum from a dean at Omega University.*

*"Fifteen years ago, Omega University implemented a new procedure that encouraged*

*students to evaluate the teaching effectiveness of all their professors. Since that time, Omega*

*professors have begun to assign higher grades in their classes, and overall student grade*

*averages at Omega have risen by thirty percent. Potential employers apparently believe the*

*grades at Omega are inflated; this would explain why Omega graduates have not been as*

*successful at getting jobs as have graduates from nearby Alpha University. To enable its*

*graduates to secure better jobs, Omega University should now terminate student evaluation of*

*professors."*

In this memo Omega University's dean points out that Omega graduates are less successful

in getting jobs than Alpha University graduates, despite the fact that during the past 15 years

the overall grade average of Omega students has risen by 30%. The dean also points out that

during the past 15 years Omega has encouraged its students, by way of a particular procedure,

to evaluate the effectiveness of their professors. The dean reasons that this procedure

explains the grade-average increase, which in turn has created a perception among employers

that Omega graduates are less qualified for jobs. On the basis of this line of reasoning the

dean concludes that to enable Omega graduates to find better jobs Omega must terminate its

professor-evaluation procedure. This argument contains several logical flaws, which render it

unconvincing.

A threshold problem with the argument involves the voluntary nature of the evaluation

procedure. The dean provides no evidence about the number or percentage of Omega

students who participate in the procedure. Lacking such evidence it is entirely possible that

those numbers are insignificant, in which case terminating the procedure is unlikely to have

any effect on the grade average of Omega students or their success in getting jobs after

graduation.

The argument also assumes unfairly that the grade-average increase is the result of the

evaluation procedure--rather than some other phenomenon. The dean ignores a host of other

possible explanations for the increase--such as a trend at Omega toward higher admission

standards, or higher quality instruction or facilities. Without ruling out all other possible

explanations for the grade-average increase, the dean cannot convince me that by terminating

the evaluation procedure Omega would curb its perceived grade inflation let alone help its

graduates get jobs.

Even if the evaluation procedure has resulted in grade inflation at Omega, the dean's claim

that grade inflation explains why Omega graduates are less successful than Alpha graduates

in getting jobs is unjustified. The dean overlooks a myriad of other possible reasons for

Omega's comparatively poor job-placement record. Perhaps Omega's career services are

inadequate; or perhaps Omega's curriculum does not prepare students for the job market as

effectively as Alpha's. In short, without accounting for other factors that might contribute to

Omega graduates' comparative lack of success in getting jobs, the dean cannot justify the

claim that if Omega curbs its grade inflation employers will be more likely to hire Omega

graduates.

Finally, even if the dean can substantiate all of the foregoing assumptions, the dean's

assertion that Omega must terminate its evaluation procedure to enable its graduates to find

better jobs is still unwarranted, in two respects. First, the dean ignores other possible ways by

which Omega can increase its job-placement record--for example, by improving its public

relations or career-counseling services. Second, the dean unfairly equates "more" jobs with

"better" jobs. In other words, even if more Omega graduates are able to find jobs as a result of

the dean's recommended course of action, the kinds of jobs Omega graduates find would not

necessarily be better ones.

In sum, the dean's argument is unpersuasive as it stands. To strengthen it the dean must

provide better evidence that the increase in grade average is attributable to Omega's

professor-evaluation procedure, and that the end result is a perception on the part of

employers that Omega graduates are less qualified for jobs than Alpha graduates. To better

assess the argument I would need to analyze 15-year trends in (l) the percentage of Omega

students participating in the evaluation procedure, (2) Omega's admission standards and

quality of education, and (3) Omega's emphasis on job training and career preparation. I would

also need to know what other means are available to Omega for enabling its graduates to find

better jobs.