



Rethinking “Rigor”

Balancing Challenge and Support for Our Students



Things I will not say:



I am not arguing higher education should not be challenging.

A photograph taken from a climber's perspective, looking down a steep, rocky mountain face. A blue and red climbing rope is visible in the foreground, held by a hand. In the middle ground, another climber wearing a helmet and gear is visible at the top of the slope. The sky is clear and blue.

It should be challenging!

Like, really challenging!

I am not arguing that we should “dumb down” our courses.



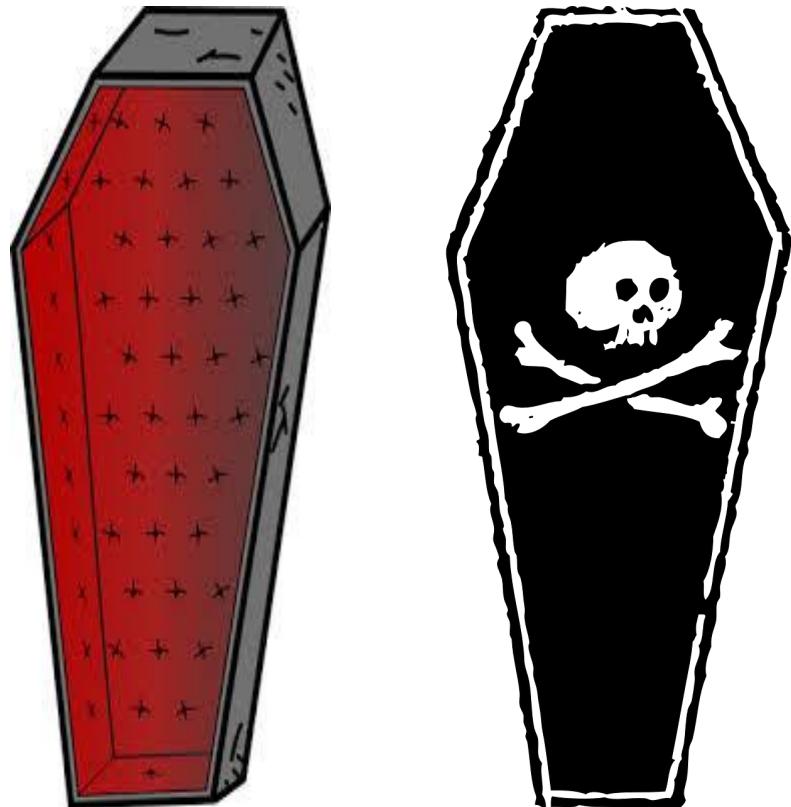
Mostly because “dumb down” is a terrible way to frame things.

I am not arguing we should abandon professional standards.

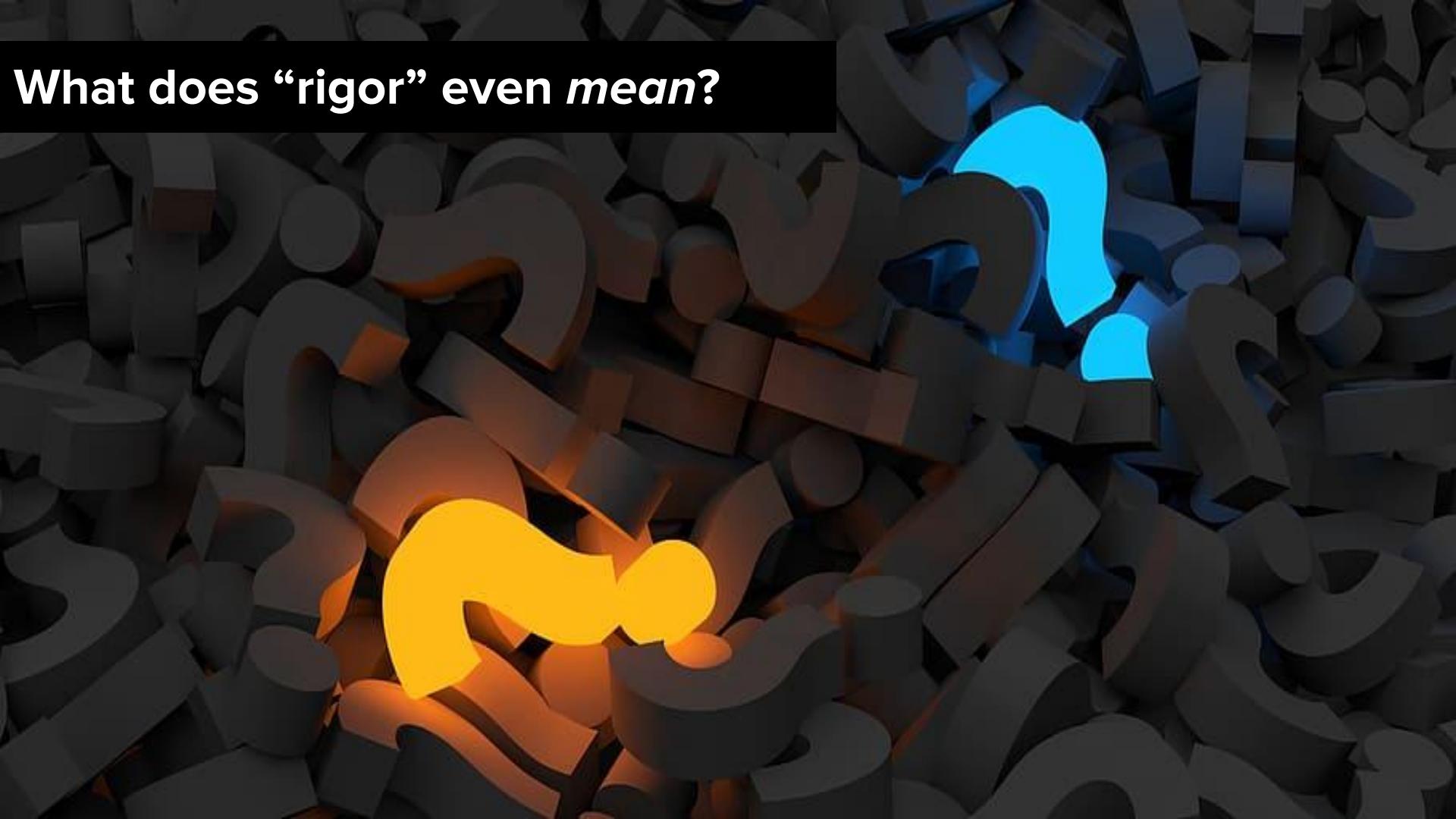


But “applying standards” is often code for “weeding out.”

And that brings us to “rigor”...



What does “rigor” even *mean*?



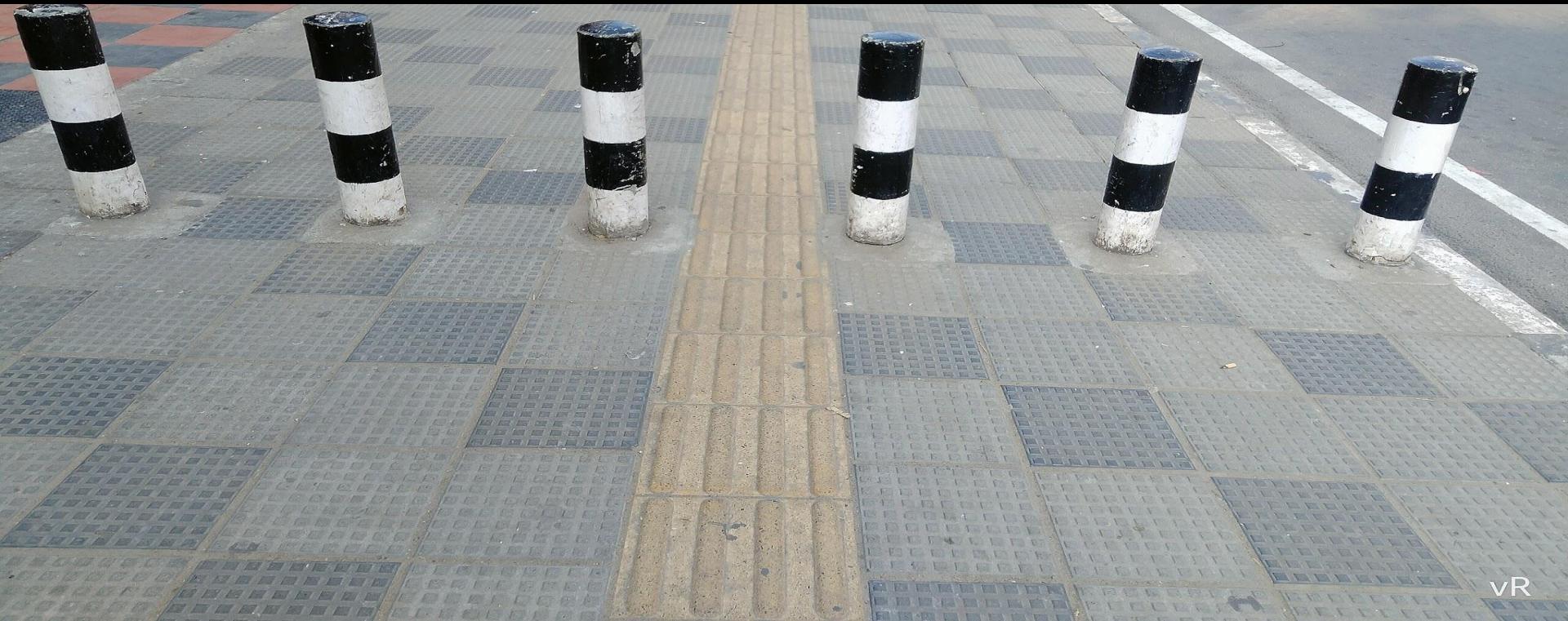
Or the College Board's recalibration of AP Test scores, doubling the percentage of students receiving 4s and 5s in some fields in a single year? As *Education Next* reports, “In AP United States Government and Politics, 24.1 percent of the 329,132 students who took the test in 2023 earned a 4 or a 5, the top two scores on the test, which is graded on a 1 to 5 scale. In 2024, that share soared to 49 percent.”

expands, when students are labeled with probation, it impacts their

mental health and their well-being, it decreases their confidence academically, it drives them away from university resources, it can actually decrease graduation rates.”

Rigor defined as “academic challenge that supports learning and growth in students” stands in contrast to more narrow and traditional ideas of rigor, which have often been equated with “high standards” and “selectivity.”

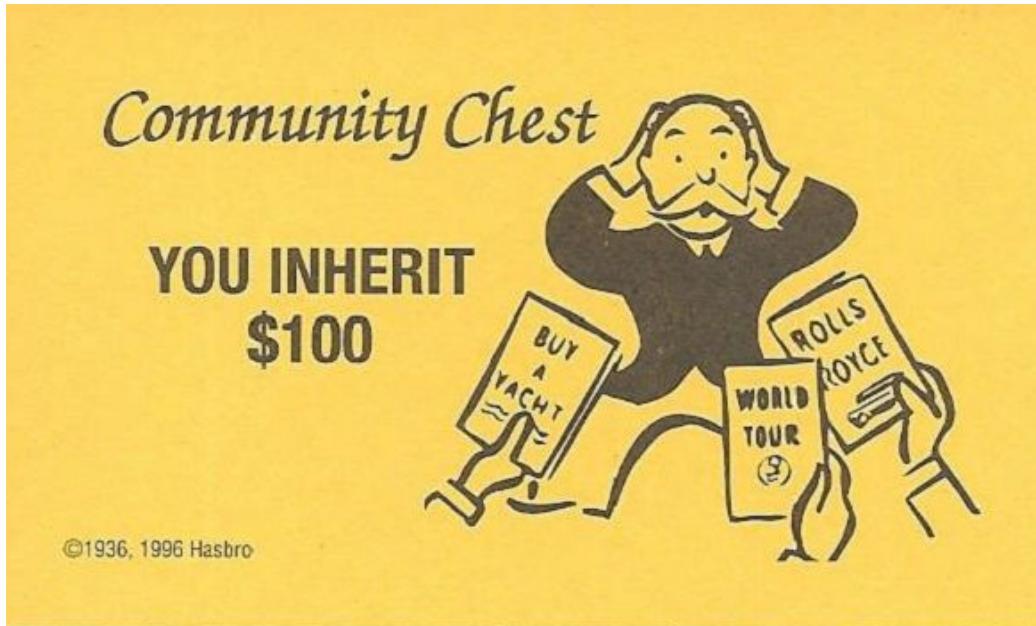
(Keller 2018)





What are we really measuring? A student's actual learning?

Or how much cultural capital they've accumulated?



rig·or²

/'rɪgər/

noun noun: **rigor**; noun: **rigour**

the quality of being extremely thorough, exhaustive, or accurate.

"his analysis is lacking in rigor"

severity or strictness.

"the full rigor of the law"

demanding, difficult, or extreme conditions.

plural noun: **rigors**; plural noun: **rigours**

"the rigors of a harsh winter"

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noun MEDICINE

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short for rigor mortis.

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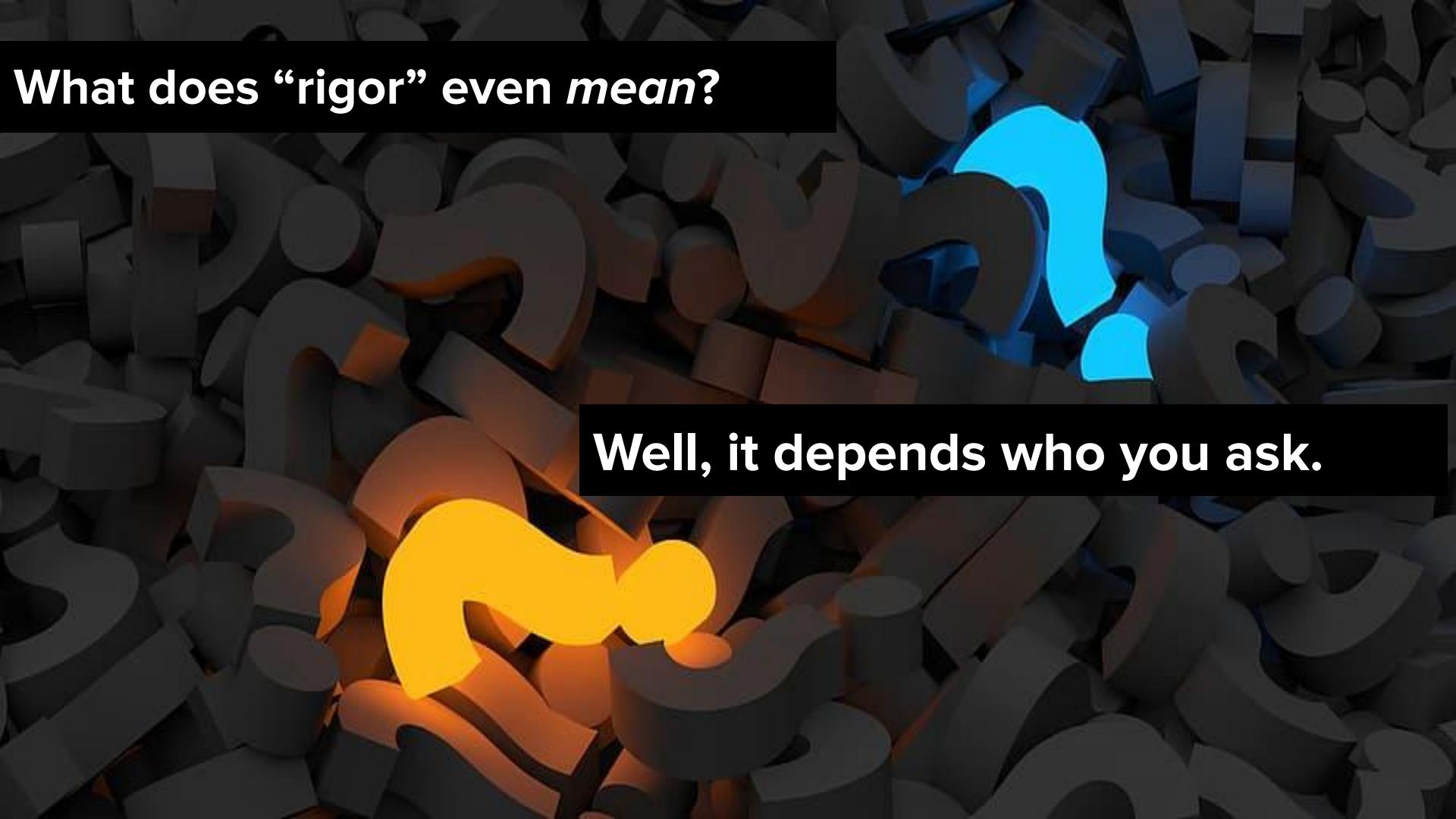


When I hear “rigor,” I think of corpses.

“Ideas are dead because they are no longer correct, if they ever were. They are tyranny because we cling to them despite the evidence.”

Diane Pike, [“The Tyranny of Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning”](#) (2011)





What does “rigor” even *mean*?

Well, it depends who you ask.

“For example, some define rigor as ‘academically demanding’ ([Wyatt, 2005](#)), ‘fast-paced’ ([Winston et al., 1994](#)), and needing a high degree of ‘energy and time’ on behalf of the student ([Winston et al., 1994](#)). Others define rigor based on attributes of the instructor, such as possessing a terminal degree in the discipline and full-time status ([Clinebell and Clinebell, 2008](#)). Still others explicitly define rigor based on cognitive expectations—for example, the depth of questions asked of students in class and on assignments ([Braxton, 1993](#)), the connection between concepts (Nicholson [1996] in [Graham and Essex \[2001\]](#)), or the amount of critical thinking ([Taylor and Rendon, 1991](#)).”

([Wyse and Soneral, 2018](#))



There are two types of challenges associated with teaching and learning spaces: logistical and cognitive.

Student descriptions of “rigorous” courses:

- “stressors such as fast pacing, high workload, unclear relevance to life or careers, and low faculty support” [\(Wyse and Soneral, 2018\)](#)
- “students most frequently asked ‘How hard is it to get a good grade?’”

“workload, level of complexity, amount of time demanded by course materials, the level of thought required...”

“It is clear that students associated workload with academic rigor and further associated workload with the need to balance various aspects of their lives.”
[\(Draeger, et al., 2015\)](#)

Table 1 Academic Rigor Indicators Ranked Highest to Lowest in Student Survey Sample

| Students Rated Survey Items as Signs of Academic Rigor in a Course | Percent of Survey Sample Rating the Item as Indicative of a Very Rigorous Course <i>Valid percentages arranged highest to lowest</i> |
|--|---|
| The number of 20 page papers that I am assigned shows that a course is ... | 75 |
| Finding out from a majority of students that they had to work hard to meet instructor standards shows that the course is... | 57 |
| The amount of reading that I am assigned shows that a course is... | 47 |
| The number of hours a week I spend preparing for class shows the course is.... | 42 |
| The number of papers assigned between 5 and 19 pages shows that a course is... | 39 |
| If a course instructor expects students to synthesize and organize ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations then a course is... | 38 |
| If a course instructor expects students to apply theories or concepts to practical problems or new situations then a course is... | 28 |
| If a course instructor expects students to make judgments about the value of information, arguments, and methods then a course is... | 21 |
| If a course instructor expects students to analyze basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory then a course is... | 11 |

From Draeger, et al., 2015

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Logistical

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Cognitive



There are two types of challenges associated with teaching and learning spaces: logistical and cognitive.

We often mistake the former for the latter.



“I now see that key problems for me lay in a series of dysfunctional illusions that tended, conveniently, to support my existing practices and make them resistant to change.”

Craig Nelson (2010)

(Some of) Craig Nelson's “Dysfunctional Illusions of Rigor”

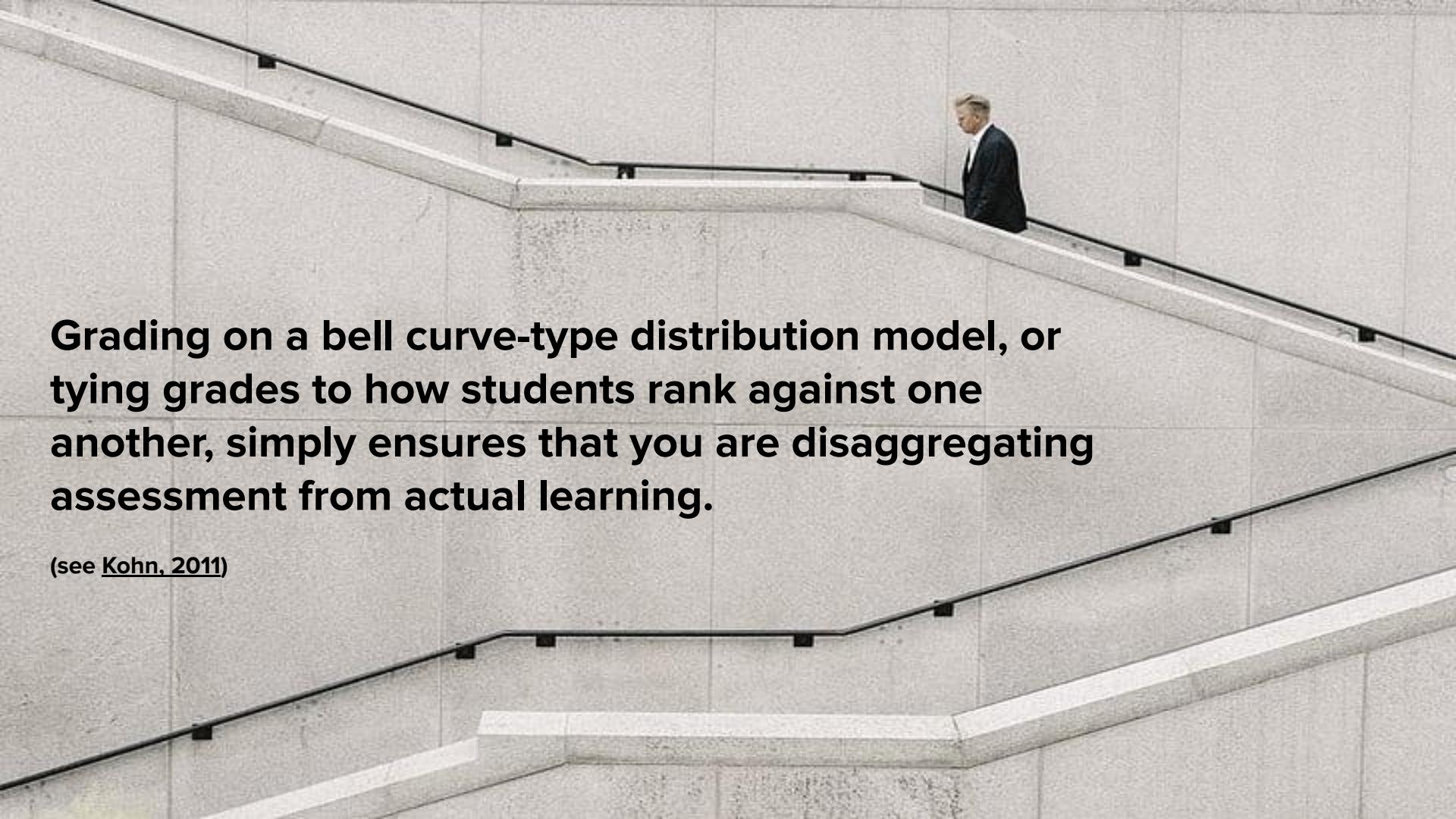
- “Hard courses weed out weak students. When students fail, it is primarily due to inability, weak preparation, or lack of effort.”
- “Traditional modes of instruction offer effective ways of teaching content to students. Modes that pamper students teach less.”
- “It is essential that students hand in papers on time and take exams on time. Giving them flexibility and a second chance is pampering the students.”

Are we simply reproducing Dead Ideas?





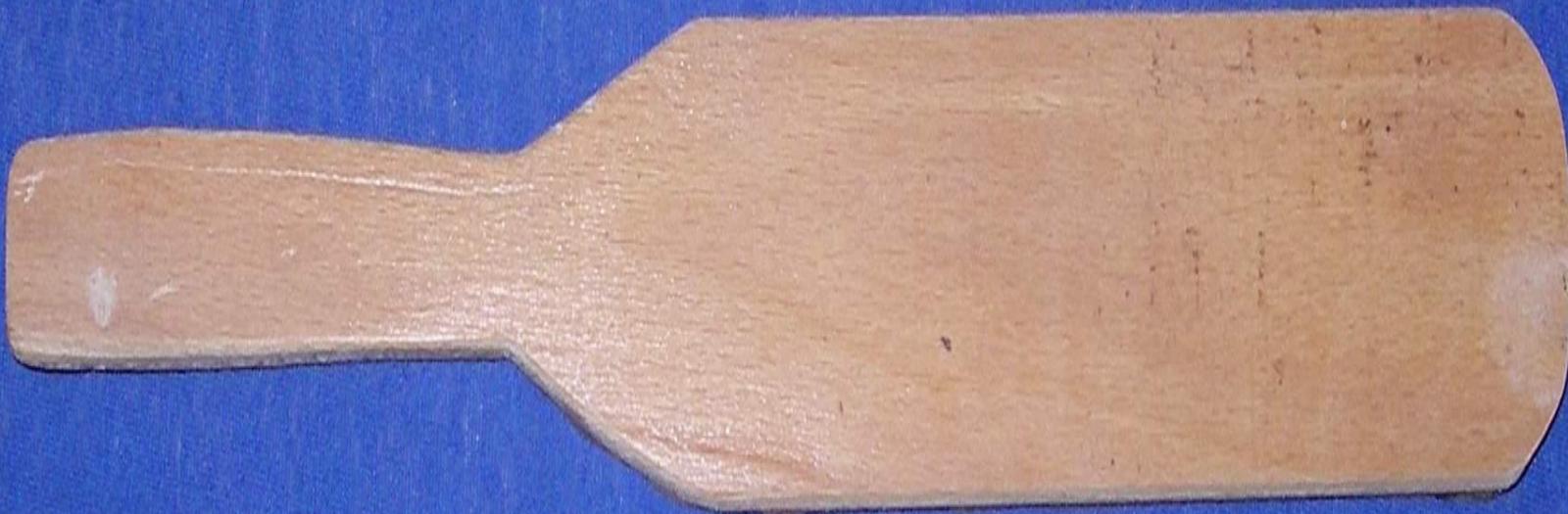
“I will cover more content” ≠ “students will learn more content”

A black and white photograph of a man in a dark suit and tie walking down a long, wide staircase made of light-colored stone or concrete. He is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the frame, moving towards the left. The staircase has a simple metal handrail and a series of rectangular black supports. The background consists of large, light-colored wall panels.

**Grading on a bell curve-type distribution model, or
tying grades to how students rank against one
another, simply ensures that you are disaggregating
assessment from actual learning.**

(see Kohn, 2011)

Repeatedly making students undergo difficult challenges without support, but with high-stakes consequences for failure, isn't rigorous teaching; it's hazing.





Our job is to remove barriers, not create them.





It's time we recognize “rigor” for the exclusionary concept that it is and for the preferential practices it usually promotes...**If it's code for ‘some students deserve to be here, and some don’t,’ then it needs to go.**

A photograph showing a row of black dumbbells of various weights lined up on a rack in a gym. The dumbbells have red and white weight markings on their handles. A large, semi-transparent black rectangular overlay covers the middle portion of the image. Inside this overlay, the word "RIGOR" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font at the top, and the word "CHALLENGE" is written below it in a larger, bold, white, sans-serif font.

RIGOR

CHALLENGE

Challenging students and engaging with them with compassion are not mutually exclusive propositions.

They actually depend on one another.





Does this thing advance learning?



Does a non-negotiable attendance or deadline policy advance learning?

Does [insert oft-used teaching strategy here] advance learning?



Does having timed, high-stakes, multiple-choice examinations
be the sole determinant of one's grade advance learning?

Does using a 100-level course as a “weed-out” class advance learning?





Do workloads that virtually mandate all-nighters in the library or the lab advance learning?



TRUST

Trust advances learning.



“People who have a trusting relationship with a teacher or mentor are better able to take advantage of critical feedback and other opportunities to learn.”

Walton and Cohen (2007)

Transparency advances learning.

What are “Transparent Teaching Methods?”

“Transparent teaching and learning methods **explicitly** focus on **how** and **why** students are **learning course content in particular ways**” ([Winkelmes 2013](#), emphases added)

Students who are unfamiliar with “college customs” and/or academic success strategies benefit from clear explications (not just explanations!) of the teaching and learning process.

This is particularly true, research suggests, for underrepresented groups and first-generation students.

“Compassionate Challenge” Advances Learning



“To thrive, our young people need to learn in settings characterized by safety, belongingness, and embodied mental health. Once these settings are in place, to thrive they then need to engage in practices associated with confronting fears, [and] embracing uncertainty.“

Sarah Rose Cavanagh, Mind Over Monsters



FIELD CHAMPIONSHIPS



GILL

FIELD
CHAMPIONSHIPS

GILL



How do we create spaces of compassionate challenge?





These slides are available at:

bit.ly/bryantbanana

or via the QR code.



Kevin Gannon

Queens University of Charlotte

gannonk@queens.edu

BlueSky: [@thetattooedprof.bsky.social](https://thetattooedprof.bsky.social)