

[A Most Disagreeable Misadventure \(I\)](#)

September 19th, 2011

It's been a while since I last wrote *here*. The last year or so has indeed been a bit busy, what with cutting **Reasonable Algebraic Functions** from 577 pages down to 437, getting started with **Reasonable Decimal Arithmetic** and transferring the ancillaries of both **RBA** and **RAF** from the old system to the new one. And then, last Fall, I had a most disagreeable misadventure.

During the Spring of 2010, I had argued in my department against the Common Final Examination being imposed by a small coterie, their idea being that it would sufficiently appease the Vice-President for Academic Affairs that the threatened splintering of Developmental Mathematics from the Mathematics Department would not occur. Well, it worked. But, of course, at a price.

Like any top administrator, the VP has a constant, pressing need to improve the CV that, at least hopefully, will open the door to a Full Presidential position. One of the things one is supposed to brag about in such circumstances is how much change one has brought about. The VP had thus been most frustrated with the very real inactivity of the Mathematics Department and then most pleased with this enormous change: a common final examination for the round about 1000 students in "**Developmental**" **Algebra**. So, it worked. But at what price!, as I will discuss in some later issue of these **Notes**, together with a continuation of a discussion of the issue of "Common Final Examination" that I started in **Common Final Exams: For What?**.

What I would like to do here is to tell the tale of the "most disagreeable misadventure".

As the Spring semester was drawing to an end and with no open reaction from anybody in the Department, I emailed the following (All names have been edited out):

From: Alain Schremmer

Date: March 29, 2010 10:42:04 AM EDT

To: President,
Vice President, Academic Affairs,
Dean, Division of Math, Science and Health Careers,
Head, Mathematics Department,
Chair, Committee For Developmental Mathematics,
and

Director, Office of Diversity and Equity.

Cc: ALL MEMBERS MATHEMATICS DEPARTMENT

Subject: Final Exam in Developmental Algebra

Given that the mandatory Common Final Examination for Developmental Mathematics to be administered this Spring:

1. Enforces an extreme version of an educational philosophy:
 - that is demonstrably harmful to developmental students in that, instead of thoughtful consideration and

- investigation, it encourages mindless memorization and teaching to the test,
 - that is clearly discriminatory in that it is mandated only for developmental students (Ref),
 - of which much more moderate implementations have resulted in the—not only deplorable but entirely avoidable—fact that, from Fall 1999 to Spring 2001:
 - Of 1732 students entering Developmental Arithmetic, only 0.23% eventually passed Calculus I,
 - Of 764 students entering Developmental Algebra after having passed Developmental Arithmetic, only 0.52% eventually passed Calculus I (Report from the Office of Institutional Research.)
2. Institutionalizes this extreme version after the Committee For Developmental Mathematics conducted a one-year “pilot” in which it was found that “pass rates for students in pilot sections were no better and in almost all cases worse than for students in the non-experimental sections” (Report on the Pilot Project Spring and Fall 2007, p. 26),
 3. Directly and blatantly favors users of the Committee For Developmental Algebra text (Ref.) of which it is an ancillary (Ref.),
 4. Is unwarranted as a data gathering instrument which is how the Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s Common Final Examination for Developmental Algebra is now being presented: “primarily [...] a tool to measure the students and gather aggregate information for moving in the right direction” (Ref.),
 5. And given that, in the two months during which I presented, in more than two dozen emails to the more than 100 members of the department, a number of very specific concerns about the Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s Common Final Examination for Developmental Algebra:
 6. With the single exception of a member of claiming to be “VERY STRONGLY OPPOSED to the idea of a common final [...] but that [he] SUPPORT[s] DESPITE [his] MISGIVINGS” (emphasis in the original) (Ref), not a single person expressed any support for the Developmental Mathematics’s Common Final Examination for Developmental Algebra while at least five tenured members of the department as well as several non-tenured members spontaneously assured me, albeit privately, that they completely shared the concerns about the Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s Common Final Examination for Developmental Algebra expressed in these emails,
 7. Not a single one of the many diverse serious concerns expressed in the above-mentioned emails was assuaged, let alone rebutted, and in fact, with the sole exception already noted above but which did not address any of these concerns, the Committee For Developmental Mathematics entirely ignored the expression of these concerns, And, moreover, given that:
 8. The decision that “[t]here [be] a mandatory standard departmental final exam that ALL students of Developmental Algebra must take [and that a] student’s score on the exam must be counted as at least 25% of his grade” (Ref) was not arrived at by a “majority of the Department”, (Ref.) notwithstanding, in that:
 - at the April 30, 2009 meeting, out of circa 35 voting members, there were only 14 votes in favor of the Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s proposal to mandate the Common Final Exam (To be counted for 100% of the final grade) (Ref.),
 - at the September 2, 2009 meeting, out of 35 voting members, there were only 15 votes in favor of the modified proposal (Impact on the Final Grade reduced, at the request of the administration, to 25%) (Ref.),
 - use of a mail ballot was explicitly rejected at the April 30, 2009 meeting by a “show of hands, 13 to 0”. (Ref.) and was not even considered at the September 2, 2009 meeting. (Ref.),

I have been led to the following two conclusions:

1. The Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s Final Examination for Developmental Algebra is against the best interest of Developmental Algebra students,
2. The lack of public opposition to the Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s Final Examination for Developmental Algebra is due to a “hostile working environment”.

In consequence of which:

1. On the day of the Final, I will NOT administer the very questionable Committee For Developmental Mathematics’s Final Examination for Developmental Algebra and, instead, I will give my Developmental Algebra students the exact same opportunity as I have given ALL my students in the past several years,
2. I am hereby entering a complaint against person or persons unknown for having created a “hostile working environment” in the Mathematics Department.

Last, but not least, I would like to take this opportunity to:

1. Remind my tenured colleagues that, in the U.S., tenure is meant to protect the faculty when dissenting from prevailing opinion and/or openly disagreeing with authorities of any sort and that, in return, it entails, not only a responsibility, but also an obligation for them to use their freedom for the good of the students,
2. Convey my deepest sympathy to my non-tenured colleagues for their lack of any such protection.

Acting respectfully in the spirit of “civil disobedience”,

– A.Schremmer

Full time member of the Mathematics Department since 1965,

(For more, see <http://www.freemathtexts.org/About.php>)

The response was interesting:

1. The only written response was that of the Department Head: *“In my naivety I believe that all faculty, tenured as well as nontenured, are protected when dissenting from prevailing opinion and/or openly disagreeing with authorities. But even tenure does not confer the right to abrogate contractual responsibilities.”*
2. Many colleagues expressed, privately and orally, their surprise that I would “take such a risk”.
3. Sometimes during the summer, I was advised by the Department Head that my schedule for the Fall had been changed and that I would not be teaching Developmental Algebra but Linear Mathematics.

So far, there was nothing disagreeable and it was when I started teaching Linear Mathematics that the “misadventure” started.

[To be continued.]

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