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The Prof Stuff

By [VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN](#)

Like many online services, [Rate My Professors](#), the engrossing professor-ranking site, seems at first to be a companion to offline life. Real-life students take real-life classes and hand down judgments of real-life professors in a virtual forum. The site invites reviewers — whose identities as students are never given or verified — to give numerical rankings, from 1 to 5, in four categories: easiness, helpfulness, clarity and the reviewers' interest in the subject matter before they took the class. You can also assign professors chili-pepper icons if you think they're good-looking. Even the losers have a place. Professors can rebut bad reviews and upload protest videos under the feeble rubric "Professors Strike Back."

Many students pore over these ratings when choosing courses and colleges. But the vulnerable professors themselves may be even more obsessed. They're rattled by, but also beholden to, what [Mark Edmundson](#), my senior-thesis adviser at the [University of Virginia](#), once called the "attitude of calm-consumer expertise" in contemporary students, who regularly rate everything from purchases to people.

But like many online experiments, [Rate My Professors](#) has turned out to be a companion to nothing. It is its own world. Sure, hot, easy teachers get the laurels traditionally denied them by tenure committees who have that fetish for credentials and scholarship. But there's more: owned by mtvU, the 24-hour cable channel that takes music and advertising to college dorms, [RateMyProfessors.com](#) has its own vocabulary, its own values and its own idiosyncrasies. Success on the site is a badge of something. It's just not immediately clear what. As a result, [Rate My Professors](#) is best consulted "for novelty purposes only," as the tag on bad fake-ID cards used to read.

Students should not base decisions about their education on it, believing (mistakenly) that they always know how to filter information on wiki sites. And professors should not get ideas from it, believing (mistakenly) that it represents the wisdom of crowds. The top

professors on [Rate My Professors](#), after all, are not the top professors in the nation. Rather, they're the top professors on [RateMyProfessors.com](#).

Take Paul V. Morgan Jr., a part-time adjunct professor at the University at Albany School of Business and Albany Law School. Of the one million professors reviewed on [RateMyProfessors.com](#), Morgan is ranked No. 8. Although Morgan's identity on the Web is dominated by his Rate My Professors entry and an article in the Albany student press about his high ranking on the site, he says that nothing in his career has changed as a result: "I enjoy my work, always did," he told me by e-mail. "Everything is the same."

The bluntness and self-assurance of Morgan's e-mail messages didn't surprise me. I read hundreds of reviews of him. I knew that in his gusto-loaded evening lectures, he struck students as "a god," "an animal," "the man" and "an alpha dog, stud and top shelf combined." I knew, too, that "if Ari Gold and Lewis Black had a baby it would be Morgan."

The raves for Morgan share a rhythm, cite one another and recycle many of the same distinctive locutions, including "top shelf," "animal" and "alpha dog." From the reviews, I gather that these expressions are favorites with Morgan himself. I wondered if his reliance on superlatives promoted a passion for superlatives in his students. Some raves rave about the raves. "Yo fizz, congrats on making top professors list on Rate My Professors!" writes one. Morgan's reviewers give the impression of having walked away from Morgan's psych-up sessions feeling psyched and wanting to register their psychedness.

Of course, they also want to register their good grades. Morgan scores high for easiness, and reviewers seem to agree that his class is difficult, if not impossible, to fail. The same is true for Jim Javor, currently ranked No. 10 among university professors. A professor of mathematics at the [University at Buffalo](#), he rates a 4.1 for easiness and a 4.8 overall.

In an e-mail message, Javor told me that he has never seen the [Rate My Professors](#) site. "I prefer to speak to students directly," he wrote, admitting that he generally steers clear of technology. While Javor's fans are more measured than Morgan's — they're math students — some of them get to sloganeering: "When rating professors in rank of awesomeness it goes great . . . awesome and . . . JAVOR."

In 2008, the top-rated professor on the site was Randy Bott, who teaches church history at [Brigham Young University](#). If, in reviews, Paul Morgan comes off as a showboater and Jim Javor seems like a modest Luddite, then Randy Bott, who has since fallen out of the top 25, is sui generis.

Now remember: I've never taken classes with any of these people. I know nothing about them in real life. I know only the figures they cut on [Rate My Professors](#), where they might as well be characters in novels. In that world, then, Bott is "cool," "groovy" and "a stud." But above all, he furnishes students with what several reviewers call "good mission prep."

As Brigham Young is a Mormon school, and Bott — Brother Bott, as some reviewers call him — is teaching the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a large part of what he's teaching is what the students will one day try, as missionaries, to teach prospective converts. He's teaching them, in short, a sales pitch and taking care to sell them on that pitch.

"His class is an extension of his testimony," one reviewer writes. Bott, it seems, is a charismatic teacher, accustomed to making converts, spreading the gospel and adjusting to new missionary technologies. That may or may not make him a good professor by offline measures, but on this, a commercial professor-ranking site, it's no wonder he made No. 1.

POINTS OF ENTRY: THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS

HOT FOR REVENGE

How do stung professors really strike back at their reviewers? They lash out with analysis. Some cries from the professorial heart: "Attractiveness, Easiness and Other Issues," by James Felton et al.; "On the Uses of a Liberal Education," by [Mark Edmundson](#); and "A Fractal Thinker Looks at Student Evaluations," by Edward B. Nuhfer. [Google](#) 'em!

AT ANY RATE

RateMy [Professors.com](#), which started in 1999, is a lovable relic of Web 1.0. With more than 10 million quirky, untrustworthy reviews, it's going strong. Read it like a novel, watch it like MTV, study it like sociology. Just don't base any real decisions on it.

JOE COLLEGE

Pop music, Haiti relief, celebrity testimonials about depression, ads for Monster.com: mtvU is just weird. Is this really college now? You judge at [mtvU.com](#).

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