

ACADEMIC GRADE NEGOTIATION

K. Shane Goodwin—Department of Mathematics

About a year ago, as another BYU-Idaho semester was winding down, some of my statistics students were making the traditional end-of-semester office visits. These were students who had struggled throughout the semester, but had never come in to see me. Almost without exception, they would ask: “What is the lowest score I can get on the final exam in order to pull a (insert your own favorite) grade?” or “Is there anything I can do for extra credit?”

I enjoy helping students who are sincerely studying hard for a final exam or working to bring their semester project to a close. I do not, however, relish the interview in which a student insists that I provide some form of extra credit—especially if it’s late in the semester. (I even question whether it is ever appropriate to offer extra credit to one student that is not available to the students at large.)

On one of these occasions, a young man knocked on my door and asked for a few minutes of my time. He was enrolled in my Math 221 (*Principles of Statistics*) class. I’ll call him Daniel, although that wasn’t his name. Daniel was trying his best to finish the semester project that was due in just a few days. He was interested in knowing what score he needed on the project to ensure a specific grade in the class, and he knew my grading software could quickly calculate this. I try to humor my students when these urges hit them by saying something like: “I’m confident you know enough mathematics to answer your own question!” or “This sounds similar to the person who wanted to calculate the least amount of good work necessary to make it through the pearly gates.” I hope to convey to my students that they should go into the final project or exam with a positive attitude, giving it their best shot.

Despite my better judgment, however, I succumbed that day and used my grading software to play “what-if” scenarios with Daniel’s scores. It wasn’t until I typed in the lowest score Daniel needed (on the project) to achieve his desired grade that I had an epiphany. I realized that I had not only given in to a student’s curiosity, but I had also set myself up for a grading bias. I now knew, along with Daniel, the minimum score he needed on the project, and I realized that this information could consciously (or subconsciously) undermine grading his project objectively. I felt a transfer of Daniel’s stress from his shoulders onto mine. At that moment, I determined to tell my students that I’m done playing the “what-if” game.

The nature of students placing an inordinate amount of pressure on themselves (or on their teachers) for the outcome of one particular exam,

“What is the lowest score I can get on the final exam in order to pull a (insert your own favorite) grade?” or “Is there anything I can do for extra credit?”

Just as players, coaches, and fans often conclude that a game is won or lost on the last play rather than on the cumulative effort throughout the time period, so it is in the field of academics.

project, or even an entire course is analogous to the “buzzer beater” final shot in a basketball game. Just as players, coaches, and fans often conclude that a game is won or lost on the last play rather than on the cumulative effort throughout the time period, so it is in the field of academics. The potential loss of a scholarship or perhaps admission to a graduate school prompts some students to calculate—with great precision—the requisite minimal grade, while ignoring the importance of consistent dedication from the opening week of classes to the end of finals.

When I reflect upon my undergraduate days in the early 1980s, I struggle to recall ever going to a professor’s office to discuss my grade. That might have been because grading software was virtually unheard of and most professors calculated scores by hand. Or maybe it was because I was intimidated (by my professors) and felt that my role as a student was to do my best to learn the material, survive the course, and see how the grading shook out in the end. Wisenfeld (1996), a physics teacher from Georgia Tech, agrees:

Time was, when you received a grade, that was it. You might groan and moan, but you accepted it as the outcome of your efforts or lack thereof (and, yes, sometimes a tough grader). In the last few years, however, some students have developed a disgruntled consumer approach. If they don’t like their grade, they go to the “return” counter to trade it in for something better. (p. 16)

Peter Sacks (1996), in his book *Generation X Goes to College*, describes how he went from being a California journalist to a community college professor, striving for tenure and learning all the academic games that students, teachers, and administrators tend to play. He was caught off-guard by students who said they “needed an A” to retain their scholarship or they “needed a particular GPA” to qualify for financial aid. He comments:

At first, I didn’t know what to say when students confronted me with such objections and pleas. My instinct—which was wrong, of course—was to say, “Well, I’ll do what I can,” thus falling into their trap. The trap being that it was somehow my responsibility that they get their desired grade, or more to the point, my fault if they didn’t. (p. 23)

I have had similar experiences. I recall a phone call a few years ago from a calculus student who had lost a \$500 scholarship because of a B+ he received in my calculus class. He called a few weeks after the semester had ended and was wondering “if there was anything that could be done” to change the grade. I told him that there was nothing wrong with a B+ in a difficult course and that, in fact, it was above average for the class. I also said it wouldn’t be right to offer him “extra credit” (of any sort) after the semester had finished. Unsatisfied and with a hint of anger, he ended his call.

The days are gone when a “C” grade meant average and a “B” was above average. Many universities, including some of the most rigorous, grapple with grade inflation. An internal study at Harvard showed that nearly 50% of undergraduate grades were A’s or A minuses in 2001, up 35% from 1986 grades (American, 2002).

Regarding grade inflation, Stuart Rojstaczer (1999) argues that grade averages have risen because professors have tacitly fostered a *quid pro quo* arrangement with their students. That is, easy grades will be given and the students will therefore leave the professor alone so he or she can get back to more important things—namely research. A second reason given by Rojstaczer is that easier grading attracts more students and therefore more money to the university. Another, more subtle, reason relates to the tremendous increase in tuition and fees at private universities: “[There is a] tendency to want to reward the student in some way for choosing that university. One way of doing this is to give the student easy grades and an easy sense of achievement. It could be said that the student is inadvertently bribing the university” (p. 19).

A second reason given by Rojstaczer is that easier grading attracts more students and therefore more money to the university.

Equally troubling is the consumer mentality of some students. More than once, I have been “interviewed” by a potential student who is essentially shopping for the right teacher prior to class registration. It feels strange to be drilled with questions regarding my syllabus, grading policy, teaching style, and overall philosophy—not knowing if I will pass the student’s inspection. Today’s student is fast becoming a “consumer of education,” subcontracting the coursework to the professors and, in essence, hiring them for the coveted grade which they view as merely a hoop to get through to the diploma and then on to a career.

On the positive side, this consumer attitude toward education requires us as teachers to clearly communicate our expectations and grading policies. A well-written syllabus will go a long way in eliminating potential misunderstandings between teacher and student. Pollio and Humphreys (Neff, 1990) state:

An instructor’s grading system and procedures should be coherent and above all, apparent to the student from the outset of a course. This is not simply to allow students enmeshed in the grading game to escape being caught off base and tagged out, but to ensure that the terms of communication are clear and their relevance to what will be asked of students apparent. (p. 114)

Regarding requests for “extra credit” and “test retaking,” I try to shield myself from the whims of every eleventh-hour hardship case that may come up. This is not to say I am inflexible or have not made adjustments when I felt conditions warranted academic mercy to smooth the edges of academic justice. I agree with Krantz (1991) who believes that there are times when a student’s grade should be changed:

Perhaps you made a clerical error in recording the grade, or you made an error in grading a problem, or you were the victim of any number of other human frailties. Do not be afraid to change a grade when it is merited. However: You do not want to develop the reputation among students as an instructor with whom grades can be negotiated. (p. 65)

Suffice it to say, I plan to tell my students (in a friendly but firm way) that if there are any “what-if” scenarios, the students will be doing their own calculations. Although I can try to empathize with the students’ academic and social stresses, maintaining a professional distance will help avoid compromising my integrity or that of the educational institution. It is not easy to determine where the line should be drawn and what mixture of justice and mercy to apply. But clear and timely communication of my expectations and grading policies will likely strengthen my position when students come calling—wanting to open grade negotiations. ∞

But clear and timely communication of my expectations and grading policies will likely strengthen my position when students come calling—wanting to open grade negotiations.

WORKS CITED

- American Association of University Professors. (2002). “Grade inflation scrutinized at Harvard and elsewhere.” *Academe*, 88(2), 12-13.
- Krantz, Steven G. (1991). *How to Teach Mathematics* (2nd ed.). Rhode Island: American Mathematical Society.
- Neff, Rose A. & Weimer, Maryellen (Ed.) (1990). *Teaching College: Collected Readings for the New Instructor*. Madison, WI. Magna.
- Rojstaczer, Stuart. (1999). *Gone for Good: Tales of University Life after the Golden Age*. Oxford, England. Oxford University.
- Sacks, Peter. (1996). *Generation X Goes to College*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Wiesenfeld, Kurt. (1996). “Making the Grade.” *Newsweek*, 127(25), 16.