

# Student Grade Appeals Can Be Reduced

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It's the end of the semester and Professor Jones reminds himself to stop by the drugstore on the way home from the university to pick up more aspirin. He knows that as soon as the students receive their grades, he will have at least a dozen students calling him or coming by his office. These discussions will range from timid requests to see the final examinations to outright arguments and threats to file a grade appeal. He experiences many headaches during this period, and the fact that he has had several grade appeals filed in the past few years does not make him feel any better. He notices that his colleague across the hall never seems to have much difficulty explaining grades in a more-or-less satisfactory manner to her students. At any rate, he observes that this professor has never been involved in any grade appeals. Professor Jones mutters to himself that some people have all the luck.

Contrary to the opinion of Professor Jones, some grade appeals can be avoided. In fact, many grade appeals can be traced to a breakdown in communication between the student and the professor. Most of this problem could be alleviated by the professor changing his classroom approach without radically interfering with his teaching style or conduct of the class. But it will take organization and planning on the part of the professor.

Specific teaching practices are suggested in this article which, if followed, should assist the professor in achieving a better relationship with his students. These practices are based on certain principles. Students have the right to know what is expected of them for purposes of

the course grade. Grading policies and practices should be equitable and unbiased. Grading should be perceived by the students as fair.

## Commitment to Previously Stated Grading Practices

One item which should be scrutinized closely is the course outline. Although the course outline conveys a message to the students, whether or not the message is clear is up to the professor. The outline should be the map or guideline for the entire semester. A typical outline might list the professor's name, telephone number, office hours, course description, course objectives, schedule of class material by fixed or tentative dates, any special explanatory notes to be read by the students, and *the professor's grading standards*.

At this point, the course outline appears to be in order and the grading procedures are in writing. If one were to observe the professor over the entire semester, however, one would probably see that in actual practice, the professor does *not* follow the written grading standards. What is printed on paper and what is actually done may be two entirely different things. If the outline stipulates a weighted-average method, the professor may just average all items together or alter the weights in some fashion. It is no wonder that students are often frustrated. Their map for the semester has led them in the wrong direction.

If a professor wants to avoid grade appeals, the first rule is to let the students know at the beginning that the course outline is his written commitment to them. He should not change the grading procedures once the outline is released to the students. To change them means the students do not know where they stand with the professor. This action will only increase the feeling of frustration of a student who is extremely grade con-

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against him. Professor has student. student may added in the is no secret work after n, a student answers or

does not like him and was "looking" for a reason to give him a low grade.

### Quantify All Grades

The professor should quantify all grades throughout the semester into objective scores and convey how he does this to the students. For example, what does a B+ on a term paper mean? Even though the student knows this paper is 25 percent of the semester grade, a B+ is

used to grade participation in an unbiased manner. The professor could use a seating chart so he knows where students are seated. Even if the professor cannot remember the name of the person who made a noteworthy contribution to the class period, the professor can remember that the third person from the wall in the second row was the one. The professor should form the habit of taking a few seconds after the class period to review the seating chart to mark down by class date who

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vague. A student who receives an A, B, and C should receive what semester grade? If one asks the student, he would reply at least a B, when the grade might well be a C.

The point is that the professor should set definite values for an A, B, and C. An A might be worth 90-100 points and a B worth 80-89 points. Instead of marking a paper with a B+, the professor could mark it in the upper range of 80-89.

Quantifying all grades enables the student to keep track of his grade throughout the semester. It helps to avoid the shock effect at the semester's end when the student who receives a B or C says that he thought the grade would be an A.

### Keep Good Records on Participation

Participation may or may not be used as a criterion in arriving at the semester grade. Its use would, of course, depend upon the subject matter and the professor. Participation can be a problem to assess and must be monitored closely to assure fair grading. Professors who state on the course outline that participation is used to turn a borderline grade up or leave it as is are inviting trouble. The student ends up thinking that the participation grade is based on whether or not the professor likes him.

It goes without saying that the professor himself should have a clear understanding of what he views as participatory behavior on the part of the students. It also follows that the professor has conveyed this information to the students so that they know exactly what is expected of them.

With this in mind, there are techniques which can be

participated. At the end of the semester, it is rather difficult for a student to protest a grade in participation when the professor can refer back to the seating chart and see that there are no dates indicating participation in the box with that student's name.

Another technique is actually used by one professor who keeps track of what his graduate students say in a seminar by marking a "c" or "q" after their names for contribution or question. At the end of the semester, if a graduate student says he thought he had participated heavily, the professor is in a position to recall whether or not the student merely asked a couple of questions or made a significant contribution to a particular class period. The seminar length enables this professor to observe his students for some time during each class meeting.

### Grade "Blind"

Another technique which the professor can use is to grade "blind." Does it matter whether Nervous Nellie or Dizzy Dan wrote that paper? In most cases, the answer is an unqualified no. The professor should request that the students place their names on the back of papers or homework assignments. Ask that they not put any identifying marks on the pages of their essay questions on tests. This lets the professor grade without knowing who the author is. Anonymity enables the professor to overcome the influence of previous opinions on the student's work, personality clashes, and the like. It also enhances the professor's reputation as the student perceives that the professor is at least trying to grade fairly. "Blind" grading does not take the professor any additional time; the grade can be put on the back of the