Six Tips for Handling Grade Complaints

By Peter Connor

It's a given—students are going to complain about the grades they receive. Also given, is your responsibility to handle such complaints. Generally speaking, this will go far better if you pre-establish your classroom protocols, put them in writing and discuss them on the first day of class. Include a page in your syllabus providing a clear picture of your grading policy, the criteria by which grades will be earned, and any attendance and class participation requirements that play into the formula. In addition, spell out the circumstances by which a grade might be reviewed and changed.

You've put a lot of effort into creating a level playing field, one on which each student has an equal opportunity to make their mark. Inform your students of this. Explain that any request to review an exam, paper, or project in order to have its grade changed puts you in a very difficult position. In fact, requesting extra consideration is requesting an unfair advantage over other students. Explain that tilting the playing field that way will require an extremely sound argument.

Here are some grading policy suggestions for your syllabus:

1. Establish a 24-hour buffer following all class sessions in which exams, papers and projects are returned that absolutely no grade discussions will be allowed. Apply the same 24-hour rule to the time period after which grades have been posted on an electronic bulletin board. In addition, clearly explain that grade disagreements will only be discussed in a scheduled appointment.

2. In the 24 hours after receiving their grades, suggest that students who are disappointed reexamine their assignment or syllabus instructions carefully. Did they follow them correctly? An essay, for instance, must tackle the relevant points in the question. A paper or project must satisfy the scope or fulfill the goals laid out in the instructions. If the requirements are not satisfied, there is no basis for a complaint.

3. In addition, suggest that students take advantage of the 24-hour rule to examine your margin-comments. If the reason for the grade they received remains unclear, or they feel that credit was withheld or points were unreasonably deducted, they may then make an appointment. During that time you will be happy to explain your reasoning, go over their work, and discuss those areas which need improvement. **Hint:** Post your office hours and try to confine these appointments to those hours.

4. Ask your students to come to the appointment prepared. Require that their complaint be in writing, and that they explain their disagreement in specific detail. Instruct them to bring relevant lecture notes, reading assignments and other supporting evidence with which to illustrate their reasoning—and then to be open to discussing how, when, why, or where they went wrong, as well.

5. Ask your students to highlight specific sections of a paper, or questions on an exam, so that you can focus on their main areas of concern. Explain that if a mistake on your part is clearly evident, it will be rectified. Also explain that if it seems that a contradiction exists between the evidence they present and the course material provided, you will make every effort to clarify, explain and/or demonstrate otherwise. Whichever the case may be, promise a rich and rewarding discussion.
6. Lastly, inform your students that if they are absolutely convinced that they have been wronged, and that their final grade or GPA is adversely affected, there are departmental and/or university grievance procedures through which they have every right to lodge a complaint and register an appeal.

One final note: if a test has been given and graded by a teaching assistant, she or he is the one positioned to provide the most help. Instruct your students to make an appointment with that person. Going over the head of a teaching assistant is an unnecessary slight and is not likely to move the student's agenda forward. If a grading issue remains unresolved after meeting with a teaching assistant, students may then request a meeting with you directly.

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