

A short take: student evaluation rights

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After retiring from teaching basic engineering in a community college, I have spent time thinking about my experiences and reviewing what I learned. From my reflections on teaching, I have selected two considerations that I believe should be student rights.

The student right to place evaluations on the transcript

If ultimately the transcript were for the student's use, it would make sense to assume that the student should have something to say in assembling the information that goes on the transcript. The graduate in his new suit wants to present as good an impression as possible. The transcript he carries should show his best work, not his failures. Perhaps the graduate had a "rocky" start but later reached a high level of competency. That is all the employer needs to know or perhaps has a right to know. Why would an instructor bother to label student work that is not yet at competency level? What student would want the instructor to vouch for less than competent work? The situation could be addressed if students were allowed to control transcript grade listings. They could take a course over until reaching a satisfactory grade that they would want to record on a transcript. The transcript would look better listing all courses completed and the final evaluations the graduate wants to show.

Letting the student select transcript entries is in no way changing course evaluations. The student would merely control what is presented to employers or other academic institutions. Information showing

how long the student took to reach the grade level would still appear, and an A earned the first time would probably still look more impressive than an A received after several attempts. Some students simply take longer than others to reach a competency level that satisfies them. One of the fundamental ideas behind our democracy is the concept of the fresh start. Getting another opportunity to succeed after repeated tries and poor starts is a model of perseverance often presented to inspire youngsters. Let them have the chance to become confident in their skills. Why pay to have failures exposed on paper in the process of collecting vouchers to substantiate competence? Those who take longer are not necessarily inferior to those who take less time to achieve mastery of knowledge or skills. Furthermore, repeating students can also serve as mentors for first time students.

The negative emotional repercussions of academic failure should be eliminated as much as possible. Failure that is dealt with in a studious, detached manner ceases to be failure but instead becomes learning experience. Persisting through attempts and setbacks on the road to competency is inherently part of life. Learning from failure is not efficiently accomplished by indelibly fixing failure on a transcript and in our minds. Anyone seriously seeking a goal knows when he or she falls short and does not need a reminder branded on his forehead and heart. The threat of archived failure can also take attention and

energy away from the quest for knowledge and divert it to learning merely how to be a clever student adept at test-taking.

When students control transcript entries, we can assume that grades below competency will never be recorded. An instructor does not have the bothersome task of putting negative labels on student work, but instead shows students what is holding them back. Such endeavors can be recognized as part of an educational process. Delusions of competency are still addressed, but less painfully than with another indelible mark of failure.

The ultimate goal is to help students reach full flower in what they do best. Let the evaluation system serve students giving them freedom to find their path and serve society in their unique way—as an important asset in a free society. A student's unique competence should be developed in an educational system that challenges the student and presents opportunities, not discouragement.

The student right to a complete review of all work including a discussion of evaluation with grades

The culmination of a course ought to be a critique, an important teaching device necessary to conclude all work to the satisfaction of the student and the instructor. The critique is a student's right and the instructor's responsibility. Sadly, a critique of the final exam is often skipped for many reasons. The

worst possible reason is that the instructor won't allow his evaluations to be challenged. The instructor should have the courage to face his students honestly and openly. He has an obligation to finish an evaluation by answering all questions about grading and the setting of realistic expectations.

It should be made clear that grades are based solely on how well student work meets the expectations of the instructor, the department, and the school. A variety of factors can cause an instructor to lose track of what reasonable evaluation levels might be. Relying on Normal Distributions ignores the fact that in most instances only the instructor has in-depth experience with the course work and an understanding of department standards. The grading guidelines should be the same each time the

course is taught. They should be reasonable for the type of program and high enough to maintain the department and school objectives. A college's reputation is built on consistent standards. A discussion of grading during a critique is necessary so that instructor expectations higher than the department requires will not make it more difficult for a student to assemble an impressive transcript. The job interviewer does not know a grade of C is actually a B when adjusted to the level of other course grades.

Critiques cannot be left to an instructor's discretion. Final critiques are a student right and a mandatory responsibility for the instructor. They are part of teaching the course and vouching for competency.



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