

Managing Expectations about Performance, Scores, and Final Grades

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“Leaders are their own best teachers. They accept responsibility and gain from their own experience and that of others.”

---Warren Bennis (1925-)

Preface

The purpose of this document is to help students understand the various contexts of performance evaluation, especially the contexts leading directly to a final grade in a course. While there exists no single strategy applicable to all students for earning high marks, avoiding certain pathways to low marks can be helpful.

Institutional Context

Occasionally, students misinterpret the grading context of an institution. This can be especially difficult for students who transfer to CSU Northridge from a Community College. And the majority of Business and Economics students are, indeed, transfer students. A physical transfer of a student is accompanied by a logical shift in expectations. In general, a four-year institution will have higher expectations of students than will a two-year institution. It follows that higher expectations can mean that fewer students will earn high marks. The students who do manage to earn high grades at the four-year institution manage to substantively improve their performance upon transfer.

College Context

In addition to higher performance expectations, the differential in earned grades can vary substantially among the various Colleges within an institution. For example, students should review the differences in earned grades between the “College” (of Business) and the “University” (CSU Northridge) for the years 1990-2004. See:

<http://www.csun.edu/coc/report06/BAE/GradeDistribBA&E.xls>

The differences, particularly in the impact of “grade inflation,” are striking. Clearly, the College (of Business) has high expectations for its students and the faculty use all of the available letter grades to reflect variations in student performance.

Academic Program Context

Some academic programs specify minimum grades for their majors enrolled in a particular course, including courses outside of their Department. It is not clear to me if this encourages students in those majors to “work harder” in order to earn high grades in

a course. But it might. So students in academic programs that do not require a minimum grade (above an “F”) can inadvertently place themselves at a disadvantage on a relative basis *viz.* other students enrolled in the same class. This is one more reason to demonstrate strong, visible performance on each scored assignment, quiz, or exam. A corollary is to make the default assumption that everyone else in class is also striving diligently for a high grade.

Academic Level Context

I regularly teach BUS 302. This course is typically comprised of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. I regularly teach MGT 360. In the Summer of 2008, the enrollment in my MGT 360 course consisted of at least one student at each academic level--freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate student. It would seem likely that such an extremely diverse distribution of students would likely exhibit a corresponding diverse degree of academic performance. A student early in her/his academic career might wish to ask her/himself—“What do the other, more senior, students know about demonstrated performance and what can I learn from them?”

Quantity of Effort is not Quality of Results

Occasionally, students confuse the quantity of effort with the quality of the results. Or put slightly differently, students occasionally confuse the amount of input with the performance of the output. The amount of input, even in a course with “a lot of work,” is not typically what is being measured in course (or an organization, especially a for-profit firm). Typically what is being measured in a College course is productive output—and even then it is not the “amount of output” but rather “the degree of accuracy of the output.” Students should strive to make their inputs efficient (or else students will run out of time on a task or activity) and their outputs effective (or else students will earn a low grade).

The Time Factor in a Course

The further into the course, the harder it is quantitatively for students to “make up” weaker early performance with later stronger performance. It might be that “in the long run,” a student is demonstrating incremental improvement, but the improvement might be lower on a relative basis than the improvement made by other students. Even if that weren’t the case, the course has to end at some point. There simply isn’t a “long enough run” in any given class or any given semester before a final grade is earned. Strong students strive to earn high marks on each assignment, quiz, and exam, especially, but not only, on assignments, quizzes, exams taken early in the course.