

C is the default grade

February 18, 2009

Student Expectations Seen as Causing Grade Disputes

By MAX ROOSEVELT

Prof. Marshall Grossman has come to expect complaints whenever he returns graded papers in his English classes at the University of Maryland.

“Many students come in with the conviction that they’ve worked hard and deserve a higher mark,” Professor Grossman said. “Some assert that they have never gotten a grade as low as this before.”

He attributes those complaints to his students’ sense of entitlement.

“I tell my classes that if they just do what they are supposed to do and meet the standard requirements, that they will earn a C,” he said. “That is the default grade. They see the default grade as an A.”

A recent study by researchers at the University of California, Irvine, found that a third of students surveyed said that they expected B’s just for attending lectures, and 40 percent said they deserved a B for completing the required reading.

“I noticed an increased sense of entitlement in my students and wanted to discover what was causing it,” said Ellen Greenberger, the lead author of the study, called “Self-Entitled College Students: Contributions of Personality, Parenting, and Motivational Factors,” which appeared last year in *The Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Professor Greenberger said that the sense of entitlement could be related to increased parental pressure, competition among peers and family members and a heightened sense of achievement anxiety.

Aaron M. Brower, the vice provost for teaching and learning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, offered another theory.

"I think that it stems from their K-12 experiences," Professor Brower said. "They have become ultra-efficient in test preparation. And this hyper-efficiency has led them to look for a magic formula to get high scores."

James Hogge, associate dean of the Peabody School of Education at Vanderbilt University, said: "Students often confuse the level of effort with the quality of work. There is a mentality in students that 'if I work hard, I deserve a high grade.'" "

In line with Dean Hogge's observation are Professor Greenberger's test results. Nearly two-thirds of the students surveyed said that if they explained to a professor that they were trying hard, that should be taken into account in their grade.

Jason Greenwood, a senior kinesiology major at the University of Maryland echoed that view.

"I think putting in a lot of effort should merit a high grade," Mr. Greenwood said. "What else is there really than the effort that you put in?"

"If you put in all the effort you have and get a C, what is the point?" he added. "If someone goes to every class and reads every chapter in the book and does everything the teacher asks of them and more, then they should be getting an A like their effort deserves. If your maximum effort can only be average in a teacher's mind, then something is wrong."

Sarah Kinn, a junior English major at the University of Vermont, agreed, saying, "I feel that if I do all of the readings and attend class regularly that I should be able to achieve a grade of at least a B."

At Vanderbilt, there is an emphasis on what Dean Hogge calls "the locus of control." The goal is to put the academic burden on the student.

"Instead of getting an A, they make an A," he said. "Similarly, if they make a lesser grade, it is not the teacher's fault. Attributing the outcome of a failure to someone else is a common problem."

Additionally, Dean Hogge said, "professors often try to outline the 'rules of the game' in their syllabi," in an effort to curb haggling over grades.

Professor Brower said professors at Wisconsin emphasized that students must "read for knowledge and write with the goal of exploring ideas."

This informal mission statement, along with special seminars for freshmen, is intended to help "re-teach students about what education is."

The seminars are integrated into introductory courses. Examples include the conventional, like a global-warming seminar, and the more obscure, like physics in religion.

The seminars “are meant to help students think differently about their classes and connect them to real life,” Professor Brower said.

He said that if students developed a genuine interest in their field, grades would take a back seat, and holistic and intrinsically motivated learning could take place.

“College students want to be part of a different and better world, but they don’t know how,” he said. “Unless teachers are very intentional with our goals, we play into the system in place.”