

Email with a Question—not.

John McCuan

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I received the following text in an email from a student, and I thought the content (or lack thereof) along with a slightly edited version of my response might be of interest to some of you.

Subject: Thanks for the Semester and a Quick Question on Grades

Hi Professor McCuan,

I just wanted to say a big thanks for this semester. Your stats class was really eye-opening for me. To be honest, I wasn't that into stats before, but now I see it's more than just numbers; it's got a lot to do with thinking about things in different ways.

I've got a question about how the grading works for the class. I've completed all the assignments except for the projects. While I understand the significance of these projects, they seemed quite overwhelming for a 3-credit course. Additionally, I had concerns about the integrity of the work. I became aware that some students might have resorted to outside help in ways that didn't seem fair or honest. This didn't sit right with me, so I chose to rely solely on my own efforts and understanding.

Remember when you asked us about what an A should mean? I wrote that it's about the effort and learning new stuff. I really think I've put in the effort and learned a lot. I've spent like 10-15 hours each week just on the homework. It took me longer because it was new to me to figure stuff out on my own, not just find answers given to me. And that's been super useful, especially with the Co-op I've been doing. I've realized that in real work, a lot of learning is on the job.

Also, this was my first real class in stats and probability. I've definitely learned a bunch. I get it if the project thing means I don't get a top grade, but I wanted to let you know that what I've learned feels more important than the grade. Your class really made a difference to me.

Thanks again,

Student X

Let me preface my response by saying that certain students during the semester have characterized certain of my responses as "harsh." As I have attempted to suggest in response to such characterizations, I have no intention to be harsh. I am simply trying to be clear with my perception of the situation. When a student writes a "project" report and it says he is going to express the definition of certain concepts, for example, a "regression" or a "random variable," then I am looking for a definition. I'm not looking for what that term "can do" or why that term is "important" or what is the historical "origin" or "evolution" of the term in vague meaningless language. I'm looking to see if the student has thought about the term and has a meaningful understanding of what the term means, or put simply "what it is." The terminology is not a problem. Rohan, for example, continued to insist on using the term "random variable," but he more or less conceded that the only solid meaning he could attach to the term was "a real valued measurable function defined on a probability measure space." And as long as what he expressed using the term was consistent with that understanding, then I have no problem with the use of the term. But when someone uses a term like that but actually has no idea what the thing is or what he is talking about, then it seems to me he is just wasting his time and wasting my time. I will very likely respond to the student that (1) he does not yet "have" a project and that (2) he has not yet "started" on a project, though he may have several written pages of "project" report. I don't think it's "harsh" to say that. It is just my simple evaluation that this is the situation.

I think my practice of giving such a frank evaluation is justified by the fact that a significant number of you this semester, when faced with the suggestion that you need to think more carefully about what you are trying to express and what you are doing, responded with a rearrangement of the same nonsense. After three or four iterations of that kind of dialogue making it clear that the student has no experience with critical or careful thinking, or even comprehension of clear criticism, and furthermore has no intention of stopping for a second to think at all about what he is doing, then something is required. In particular, when my comments are repeatedly ignored

and on the contrary met with empty assurances from the student that he really understands what he is doing—or even worse some kind of flattery that he appreciates my comments and has “revised” what he has written (while completely ignoring what I have said), then at least sometimes I am inspired to express a higher level of clarity. If that is “being harsh,” then I guess that is what it will have to be.

While I am at least tangentially on the topic of course grades, it may be instructive to mention my evaluation of another student’s “performance” in the course, for lack of a better word. This student, who like student X will remain nameless, asked me about something like this openly in front of other students yesterday, so I do not think he will have an objection to me elaborating on what I told him. Basically, the student did four things this semester.

- (a) Conversation: He had conversations with me in which it was clearly expressed that he had considered the content of the lecture, the course notes and the homework assignments (please note this carefully), and he had thought about that content and understood a lot of it.
- (b) Honest effort to think critically: At some point he expressed that he was disappointed that the course material did not seem to have the depth he had anticipated. He admitted that maybe this was because he didn’t understand things better, but he was not really motivated to put in the effort to make that determination.
- (c) Something related to the course material: In view of the student’s sentiments expressed in (b) I made two comments:
 - (i) If the student couldn’t find something interesting to think about, that was his own fault. I told him it did not make sense to be constrained either by the shortcomings of the course material or the instructor. I suggested it was primarily **his responsibility** to make sure he found and learned something interesting and hopefully useful.
 - (ii) I attempted to suggest some topics that the student might find worthy of his interest. Among those was the suggestion to “understand fully the details of the central limit theorem.”

His response was to put in some time thinking carefully about the central limit theorem. He did not complete the suggestion of understanding the result fully, but he learned **something**, and was able to tell me and others something about it. He also made it clear that he found something he thought was interesting.

The fact that he did not understand the result fully was in large part irrelevant. He knew he didn't understand it fully, and he had a better understanding of which direction he needed to go to achieve that full understanding if he wanted to invest the effort to do that. If he had tried to create the impression he had understood the central limit theorem without understanding it, that would have been much worse. Fortunately, he had already committed to **(b)**, so that would not happen.

- (d) Thinking and learning: He actually learned something quite interesting, and he could articulate it. It was this: "I always perceived mathematical analysis as a kind of collection of calculational curiosities unrelated to the things I found interesting, but if I am ever going to understand what is going on with probability and, for example, the central limit theorem, then I will need to learn a lot more mathematical analysis."

Several of you have written in your "paper 1" on grading that you felt there should be broader criteria for evaluation rather than a narrow set of tasks, especially a set of tasks dominated by exams. Of course, I don't really have proper exams, though I am required by the mandate of administrative and student busybodies to include exams. But the point is that this student didn't turn in much homework. And he was assigned an "A" for his course grade. This was partially because I could write down the things I have written above. They have substance, and I think they give a reasonably realistic evaluation of what the student did. And he did something. It was not necessarily something standard. There were respects in which his "performance" could be criticized, and in fact, I did mention that he seemed to be sort of "out of it" for part of the semester. But the bottom line is that there could have been many routes to a course grade of "A" in my course. I like to emphasize certain routes involving critical thinking, and these seem to be challenging routes for many of you.

I will mention one other "route," though it is not necessarily one of which I approve. There were, of course, a number of students who wrote "project" reports and didn't really have projects as mentioned above. One approach to such a situation, as mentioned above, is to reaffirm that the instructor's criticisms have been taken into account, and the instructor and his comments are greatly appreciated, and the project report (and presentation or whatever) have been revised (while pretty much being exactly the same), but the student has learned a great deal and so on and so forth. I have tended to assign such students a course grade of "A." Obviously these students are doing something. In my view, they are clearly not getting the whole "critical thinking" angle, but I'm not even really adamant about that. I know I can only

give students an opportunity. As I told student *Y* discussed above, if you are going to learn something, **you** are going to have to do the learning. And some students just can't do it. It's just too far outside their experience, and I guess I am unable to adequately paint the picture for them of what critical thinking and learning are about. So if I sense a lot of senseless struggle coupled with the pretension that the student is "learning" something based on his own evaluation, I am often inclined to defer to the student's own (incorrect) evaluation when it comes to the course grade.

That brings me back to Student *X*. If you want to have an "A" as your course grade, and you write an email to ask for an "A" as your course grade, then...

Hello Student *X*,

You wrote in your email that you had a question on grades, more precisely "Quick Question on Grades" is in your subject line and the first sentence in your second paragraph is "I've got a question about how the grading works for the class." I have read your email three times now. I do not see any question about "how grading works for the class." The only question I see is the following:

- Remember when you asked us about what an A should mean?

The answer to this question is: Yes, I remember asking something like that. I also read your "paper 1" in relation to this topic. I remember that you did write something like what you have mentioned in your email: That (you think) the course grade should be a reflection of effort and learning new things. Since I have answered your only question, I suppose I may stop here.

I will continue. Perhaps among the most useful "new" things you probably could have had the opportunity to learn my my course (I hope) are the following:

- (1) When you say you want to do something or you are going to do something (like ask a question or try to learn something), then you should at least do that or try to do that. (I don't see, for example, anything that would have stopped you from asking a question in your email about the grading for the course, and you said you "had a question" abundantly implying you intended to ask a question, but you didn't actually follow through and ask a question.)

- (2) There is a difference between just “jumping through hoops” without doing any critical or careful thinking about what you are doing. For example, if you had thought carefully about writing that you were going to ask a question about the grading in the course, then you probably would have asked a question. At least I see nothing that prevented you from asking a question, and the fact that you did not ask a question indicates you have not taken the opportunity to develop the ability to think critically and carefully about what you are, in this instance writing and, doing. Similarly, I made it pretty clear that if all you did during the semester was attempt the homework, and you didn’t go beyond that to think critically and carefully about something, then you should expect to get a “B” in the course.

From my perspective it seems quite clear that you “should” be assigned a “B” for the course. This conclusion is based both on what I wrote about how the grading for the course was going to be executed—which at least in this instance seems to be crystal clear—and on what you have written, both about what you thought was a reasonable basis for the course grade and that you didn’t do anything beyond the homework—and finally with the evidence from your most recent email with respect to the opportunities (1) and (2) above.

I assigned you a grade last night, and I don’t remember what that grade was. If you had grades for most of the homework, then that grade should not have been a “C.” According to the analysis above, that grade should have been a “B,” and that is probably the grade you were assigned. I don’t see that an email with empty platitudes about the course being “eye-opening” and “stats” being “more than just numbers” goes anywhere toward changing this conclusion. If you are interested in changing the grade of “B,” which you have likely been assigned, to an “A,” then some different approach will be necessary.

John

As a final point, I assigned each of you a course grade last night. It is entirely possible that I assigned some of those grades incorrectly. It is a somewhat complicated matter to assign those course grades. As it comes out, it has some to do with what you expressed about grading. And it also has something to do with how I suggested I

planned to assign course grades. There is some flexibility. It would be ideal if each of you could review the grade I have assigned and we could discuss it if necessary, and you could let me know if you think the assignment is in error. Not one of you wrote in your “paper 1,” “Whatever I say the grade should be is what the grade should be,” so it’s a little late to put that forward as the basis for your grade now.