

Dear Sociology 331 students:

Yesterday I had a meeting with Dr. Paul Lasley, Chairman of the Sociology department, about student concerns with regard to our class. Two student representatives of the class, identifying themselves as speaking for the concerns of all the students, have approached Dr. Lasley. One last Friday, and one on Tuesday of this week.

I'm glad that Dr. Lasley is approachable and accessible to the students in the department, and that he was so generous with his time in discussing your concern with me.

The main points of concern which Dr. Lasley brought to my attention were:

1. Students were concerned about how midterm grade reports were determined as the midterm exam was given only one day before the grades were due.
2. Students were concerned with how I would grade the participation part of their grade.
3. Students were concerned that my grading of the essay exams was biased in terms of class "favorites" of the teacher, as they perceived that I seemed to favor certain students over others during class.
4. Students continue to feel that the grading on their exams is unfair.

I would like to address these concerns at this time.

With regard to the first concern, Dr. Lasley conveyed to me that students believe I selected only certain exams to grade based on my in-class perceptions that there were "problem" students, and that only these students would need to have their exams checked for the midterm grade. This perception appeared to be based on the remark I made that I graded for the midterm only those exams that were "problems." I regret that I did not explain my midterm grading in more detail. On Wednesday evening I read through all of the exams. On the basis of this first reading, I then went back and selected out those exams which, in comparison with the bulk of the exams, were obviously deficient in their answers. On Thursday morning, I then did a first grading of the answers on those exams which I had culled out on Wednesday night. This was necessary to determine if the grade was at least in the ballpark of a "C," "D" or "F". Over the weekend I then went back and graded all of the exams, including the ones I had graded on Thursday morning. Unfortunately I did not have the foresight when planning my syllabus over Christmas break to call the Registrar's office ahead of time and find out when midterm grades would be due, or I would not have scheduled the exam at such an date. When I referred to those exams which were going to be "problems," I was referring to actual "problem exams"

rather than “problem people”.

With regard to the second concern, student spokesperson(s) expressed the concern for the whole class that participation grades would be biased by the subjective evaluation of the instructor. They wanted to know how I could make a fair evaluation of participation, especially since there were limited opportunities for participation in the class. Currently participation is to count for 25% of your final grade. I had planned on evaluating participation the way most faculty end up having to evaluate it, simply factoring in an A for regular attendance. However, since students are concerned that instructor bias may color grading in this regard, I have decided to drop the participation requirement as part of the final class grade. I continue, of course, to value participation and hope that you will continue to offer the intelligent and thoughtful comments which I have come to expect from this class. Dropping the participation requirement will alter the evaluation of your final grade in the following way:

Midterm exam	33 1/3%
Final exam	33 1/3%
Written & Oral	33 1/3%
Book Review	

#### THE ATTENDANCE POLICY REMAINS IN FORCE.

With regard to the third concern, I regret that students have developed a perception that I have “favorites” in the class and that this bias colored my grading of their essay exams. My response to this concern, however, is that the class overestimates my familiarity with your names. While I understand that it is important for pedagogical reasons for an instructor to learn the names of all their students in a class, this is a very slow skill for me. I have so far learned only very few student names, as would have been obvious when I handed back exams last Wednesday. I had to call out each person’s name and wait for them to identify themselves, before I could hand back the exam. While I have made an effort in the past to learn student names, and I usually know everyone’s name by the end of the semester, at the present time I am simply not able to link a student’s name on an exam with an image of that student’s face. Exams necessarily were then graded on content only.

It is an unusual class, I believe, that would prefer student anonymity, but I can refrain from further efforts to learn student names.

With regard to the fourth concern, Dr. Lasley reported to me that students in the class continue to feel that the grading of their exam was unfair, based on the fact that some students had extra time to complete the exam. Since one of the student spokespersons reported student sentiment to Dr. Lasley on Tuesday of this week, after those students who had not had the extra time were given the option of either taking extra time to answer optional questions or to have their exam curved against those students who did not take extra time, this suggests that students remain unhappy with their choice of taking a curved grade. Dr. Lasley wondered, first, if

students understood how the curving was done. He was concerned that perhaps students did not understand that they were not curved with those students who had taken the extra time. I would like to clarify the curving process for those students who may be confused. In class on Wednesday I obtained a complete list of all 21 students who did not take any extra time. Sixteen other students had taken additional time, with the bulk of those students finishing about 20 minutes later. In curving the exams of those students who did not have extra time, I FIGURED IN ONLY THE 21 STUDENTS WHO HAD REPORTED ON WEDNESDAY THAT THEY HAD NOT HAD ADDITIONAL TIME. Students were then curved ONLY with those students who were in the same boat as they were. However, since 20% of the students who did not have extra time also got A' s on their exams, curving the exam did not bring student grades up very much. It is reasonable that students may still, then, be concerned that they were not treated fairly.

Both Dr. Lasley and I agree that if students in the class continue to be unhappy with their grades, the issue should be reopened. Options should be discussed as to how to fairly redress the continuing perception of unfairness in the grading situation. I regret very much that in being courteous to some students, I inadvertently led other students to feel disadvantaged in the situation. I am sincerely sorry, and I can empathize completely with those students who feel that some students had a greater opportunity to demonstrate their learning than others. I am as interested as Dr. Lasley in finding a way to redress this discrepancy and providing an equal opportunity for all my students to demonstrate their learning.

Dr. Lasley suggested that I give 20 minutes at the end of class this Friday, tomorrow, to all those students who remain unhappy with their curved grade, to discuss options for redressing the situation and for reaching a consensus on the most favorable option.

I am in hearty agreement with him on this suggestion. **PLAN TO TAKE THE LAST 20 MINUTES OF CLASS ON FRIDAY, MARCH 12, TO DISCUSS AND AGREE ON OPTIONS FOR ALLOWING THOSE STUDENTS WHO REMAIN UNHAPPY WITH THEIR CURVED GRADES TO DEMONSTRATE FAIRLY THEIR STUDENT LEARNING.**

All students are invited to participate in this discussion, as the student spokesperson reported that all students in the class, even those who received A' s and B' s on their exams, were disgusted with the unfair treatment of some of the students, and that the only reason they were not speaking out was because they were concerned the exam would be invalidated. So I welcome the input of all the students in solving this common problem.

**ALL STUDENTS WHO REMAIN UNHAPPY WITH THEIR CURVED GRADES MUST RETURN TO ME ON FRIDAY OR BY MONDAY, MARCH 22, AT THE LATEST, THEIR COPY OF THEIR MIDTERM EXAM. THIS IS NECESSARY IN ORDER TO DETERMINE HOW MANY QUESTIONS THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO COMPLETE OR WERE ABLE TO COMPLETE ONLY PARTIALLY DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS.**

I would like to address a fifth student concern at this time as well. In class on Friday, March 5th, I received a number of loud complaints about the amount of time that students had to study

for this midterm exam. In addition, the issue was raised that it was unfair for students to be tested on material in the text, when that material hadn't also been covered in class. Based on the vociferous complaints I received about the amount of studying that was needed and complaints on the number of review questions I expected students to answer, I have decided to eliminate review questions for the final exam and to let each student choose the pace of studying that is most comfortable for them. I will, however, continue to expect students to be familiar with material in their text. When I offer a college-level Sociology course, I am also responsible to fairly represent the discipline in the course. Appropriate content cannot be adequately covered only in lecture, and the text is used to supplement my efforts to meet course objectives.

Lastly, I would like to comment that I am appreciative of the class's deeply felt commitment that all my students have an equal and fair opportunity to demonstrate their student learning. A commitment to equal opportunity is an important value in American culture. The strength of this commitment has led me to reevaluate some of my teaching practices. I can see now how I may have been giving students in my section of Sociology 331 an unfair advantage over the students in other sociology courses at ISU. While I have made a concerted effort to support student learning by providing comprehensive review questions, allowing students to select the questions they wish to answer on exams from a panel of questions, and allowing students to bring in four sheets of notes to the exam, I also must accept that this kind of supportive teaching is unfair if not all the teachers in the Sociology department are engaging in similar practices. I recognize that I have been unfairly advantaging my students, leading to a disproportionate amount of A's. **To rectify this larger problem of unfairness, I have decided to eliminate the distribution of review questions ahead of time. I also will not allow students the option of selecting particular final exam questions from a list of questions, and I will not allow students to bring notes to their final exam.** I believe that this is a fairer approach to the exam situation, unless all other Sociology instructors are also engaged in the same process. The final exam will remain five short answer essay questions and two longer essay questions.

If there are individual students who would like to receive a listing of comprehensive review questions, I will be happy to meet with you on an individual case by case basis and discuss your needs.

Because of student concern with instructor bias affecting the grading of essay exams, I will also require students to identify their final exam by code rather than by name, and I will pass around a sheet for students to write their name and code on at the time of the exam. A student volunteer can then take this sheet to Dr. Lasley's secretary, who will give me the sheet only after I have completed grading all the exams. This process should also help me to eliminate any inadvertent biases that I may have that I am not aware of.

**While I realize that students may wish to reply to this message by email, I regret that I will not respond by email to any emails about this issue. Rather, I will wait until class discussion on Friday to discuss the issue in person. I will also be available in my office**

**hours to address any student concerns in person.**