

Communicating About the Behavioral Dimensions of Grades

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In *The Teaching Professor* (August/September 1993), John H. Williams of Pepperdine University provided a detailed profile of the characteristic attitudes and behaviors of both the typical A and the typical C students. He used the profiles to explicitly communicate his values and expectations, to help students better understand how their performance would be judged. He believed faculty could use the approach to help students take more responsibility for their own learning.

A faculty committee addressing standards in our College of Business at San Jose State University found this article a valuable source of dialogue last spring. The profiles helped committee members communicate and compare their own grade expectations, in an attempt to establish some uniformity of standards within our college. In our dialogue we elaborated on and created additional behavioral dimensions for the original standards.

We have distributed these dimensions to hundreds of students during orientations and in classes. We have not assessed their impact empirically, but we believe these dimensions benefit our students in the following ways:

*We have distributed
these behavioral dimensions
of grades
to hundreds of students. ...*

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benefit our students.*

- Students learn that not all instructors or institutions have the same standards. Many students assume that the same effort they expended in high school or a community college will earn equally high grades at a university.
- Students clearly discern the professor's concern for them and their success. That is, an unconcerned professor would not go to this length to mentor student success.
- Students see that an A is not reserved for the truly gifted, but is a level that a reasonably bright and motivated student can attain. The path to an A is not vague, but the result of behaviors students can consciously adopt to increase their likelihood of success.
- Students learn that communication skills will be used to evaluate their classroom performance. This encourages those students with deficient skills to take active steps to remedy their situation.
- Students perceive that the behaviors are designed to *guide* them, not to *judge* them. If they do not have the time it takes for an A, they are encouraged to modify their expectations and work toward a more attainable grade.

BEHAVIORAL DIMENSIONS OF GRADES

The following information is designed to explain what behaviors are likely to earn you an A versus a C. Treat the nine dimensions as guidelines for earning these grades rather than rigid conditions for or guarantees of success. In particular classes, for example, an A student can earn a C while a C student can earn an A. Likewise, an A student may earn an A without satisfying the characteristics of an A student on all nine dimensions. It is very difficult for anyone, no matter how exceptional, to consistently exhibit every quality associated with that of an A student.

'A' or OUTSTANDING STUDENTS 'C' or AVERAGE STUDENTS

1. Ability (Talent)

... have special aptitude, motivation, or a combination of both. This talent may include either or both creativity and organizational skills.

... vary greatly in aptitude. Some are quite talented but their success is limited by a lack of organizational skills or motivation. Others are motivated but lack special aptitude.

'A' or OUTSTANDING STUDENTS 'C' or AVERAGE STUDENTS

2. Attendance (Commitment)

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| ... never miss class. Their commitment to the class resembles that of their professor. Attending class is their highest priority. | ... periodically miss class and/or are often late. They either place other priorities, such as a job, ahead of class or have illness/family problems that limit their success. |
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3. Attitude (Dedication)

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| ... show initiative. Their desire to excel makes them do more work than is required. | ... seldom show initiative. They never do more than required and sometimes do less. |
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4. Communications Skills

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| ... write well and speak confidently and clearly. Their communication work is well-organized, covers all relevant points, and is easy to listen to/read. | ... do not write or speak particularly well. Their thought processes lack organization and clarity. Their written work may require a second reading by the professor to comprehend its meaning. |
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5. Curiosity

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| ... are visibly interested during class and display interest in the subject matter through their questions. | ... participate in class without enthusiasm, with indifference, or even boredom. They show little, if any, interest in the subject matter. |
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6. Performance

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| ... obtain the highest scores in the class. They exhibit test-taking skills such as an ability to budget their time and to deal with test anxiety. They often volunteer thoughtful comments and ask interesting questions. | ... obtain mediocre or inconsistent scores. They often do not budget their time well on exams and may not deal well with test anxiety. They rarely say much during class discussion and their answers indicate a cursory understanding rather than mastery of material. |
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NOTE: Performance is a joint function of a student's native ability and motivation. Punctuality, attendance, attitude, curiosity, effort or time commitment, and preparation all indicate motivation.

7. Preparation

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| ... are always prepared for class. They always respond when called on. Their attention to detail sometimes results in catching text or teacher errors. | ... are not always prepared for class. They may not have fully completed the assignment, have completed it in a careless manner, or hand in their assignments late. |
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8. Retention

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| ... learn concepts rather than memorize details so they are better able to connect past learning with present material. | ... memorize details rather than learn concepts. Since they usually cram for tests, they perform relatively better on short quizzes than on more comprehensive tests such as the final exam. |
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9. Time Commitment (Effort)

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| ... maintain a fixed study schedule. They regularly prepare for each class no matter what the assignment. They average 3-4 hours of study for every hour in class. | ... study only under pressure. When no assignment is due, they do not review or study ahead. They average no more than 2 hours of study for every hour in class. They tend to cram for exams. |
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Performance is a joint function of a student's native ability and motivation.

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Source: Standards, Assessment and Testing Committee — Dr. Paul Solomon, Chair, College of Business, San Jose State University, April 1995. Adapted from John H. Williams, "Clarifying Grade Expectations," *The Teaching Professor*, August/September 1993. T_P