



The Student Who Was Missing-in-Action

Assistant Professor Sam Benson gently replaced the phone handset in its cradle, slowly pushed his chair back from his desk, stood up, stepped to his office door and gently closed it, returned to his seat, took a deep-breath, and then unleashed a string of profanity that would have shocked and embarrassed his less “cosmopolitan” colleagues. Benson was a first year faculty member, and his first teaching assignment was in a second year, second semester elective course, Managing the Moderate-Sized Enterprise (“MMSE”). The next day was to be the twentieth and final session of the course, with the remaining month of the semester dedicated to student-team projects. As with many second-year electives, MMSE students were to be graded half on their in-class participation and half on the quality of their written work.

What had set off Benson was that at this late date, one of his students, George McHenry, had just called to find out what he could do to redeem himself in the course so that he would receive a Category III and not a Category IV final grade. McHenry was concerned that he had received enough III’s in the first semester of the second year that a Category IV would automatically prompt a review by the Academic Performance Committee (APC), perhaps jeopardizing his chance for graduation in June.

McHenry’s worry that he was headed towards a low grade was certainly grounded. He had already missed 10 of the 19 sessions that had already taken place. When Benson had suggested that at the very least, McHenry should attend the final, wrap-up session, McHenry explained that he couldn’t since he already had an appointment scheduled in another city to solicit funding for the dot.com internet start-up that had commanded his undivided attention during the semester.

The invective still cooling on his tongue, Benson sat, his elbow on the desktop, his fingers slowly kneading the tension from his forehead, wondering what he should do now.

First-Time Teacher

Benson had joined the faculty immediately after completing his doctorate. Though he had taught as a teaching assistant during his master’s program and to colleagues while working, this was his first chance to teach a semester-long, graded course in a degree-granting program. The course material was also new for Benson. His dissertation had focused on the management of manufacturing organizations within fairly large companies—some global in scale, yet MMSE

This case was prepared by Professor Steven Spear. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management. Names of people and institutions have been disguised.

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addressed a much broader range of issues faced by operating managers of small enterprises, many not in the manufacturing domain. Benson was fortunate though to be teaching with an experienced and respected member of the faculty, Ken Arrow. Therefore, though Benson had to master the case material and the teaching plans on a day-to-day basis—even writing several cases that were to be included in the syllabus, he didn't have to operate alone. Before each case discussion, Arrow had Benson prepare his own teaching plan before the two of them discussed how best to approach the session. Then, Benson watched Arrow teach a section before teaching his own. Oftentimes, Benson and Arrow would have an informal "debrief" before repeating the process the next day. In addition to providing this on-going day-to-day support, Arrow—as course head—also handled the more difficult issues of course design and management.

Benson's Section of MMSE

The first several days of teaching were difficult for Benson. Don Major—an extraordinarily popular and much experienced senior professor had been scheduled to teach one of MMSE's two sections, but a reassignment of teaching duties left a vacancy that Benson had been tapped to fill. Though pre-registration for the course had been beyond the classroom's capacity of 75, and though the first-day attendance was still over 50 students, the actual enrollment settled at 19 once the "shopping period" ended and the students had committed to their courses for the semester.

Much to his delight, Benson discovered that the students who did remain accepted tremendous responsibility for making the course a success. By Arrow's experienced estimation, the students in the second section came to class consistently well-prepared and engaged in discussions that were noteworthy for the students' willingness to challenge each other constructively and even raise questions when they did not understand a point. With the terrifically high, shared commitment to learning, the course felt much more like an excellent doctoral seminar than did a typical MBA course in which cold-calling and scarce air-time contributed to a somewhat different dynamic.

The single exception to this universally exceptional performance was McHenry. Early in the semester he began to establish a poor attendance record. When he was in class, McHenry was not engaged, evidently focused on some other, non-course material. And, in fact, he wasn't there all that often. By the mid-way point, he had missed four classes, and during the second half of the semester, he established an unbroken string of seven more no-shows. In a class of only 19, the grading required that only one Category III grade be assigned. By the end of the semester, Benson figured that McHenry had made allocating that single low-pass a simple process.

Grading Alternatives

McHenry's call made Benson realize that he had more grading options than a I, II or III. All grades were meant to reflect a student's commitment to and achievement in mastering a course's material. Category I, II, and III grades were all passing. Benson discovered that there was also a Category IV grade that failed a student for a course, but still provided credit for having taken it. An NC provided no credit at all. In the last semester, this grade could deny graduation to a student who had not acquired credit for extra courses taken in the fall. Students who received a cut-off number of IIIs were automatically reviewed by the Academic Performance Committee. A IV counted as two IIIs for screening purposes, and McHenry had calculated apparently that with a III in MMSE, he would evade the APC's notice but that with a IV, he would draw its attention.

After learning all this, Benson chuckled that McHenry would have been wiser not to call. Benson had been planning on giving a III. Now, he had to figure out what grade to chose from a set that included alternatives more painful to McHenry.

Advice

Benson had concluded his phone conversation with McHenry by explaining that he did not know what his alternatives were, but that he would find out. Over several days, he solicited advice from more senior colleagues, receiving a variety of recommendations.

On the more lenient end of the spectrum, one senior professor said that Benson should withhold judgment until the end of the semester. "Your grading scheme was based half on class participation and half on projects. Give him a zero for in-class, see how he does on the project, and calculate grades at the end as you would have under any circumstances."

Other professors and deans took harsher views. One said that the student could only show his own learning with the project but that he had completely failed in his obligation to facilitate the learning of his fellow students. "Give him a four!" was the advice.

Another was even more severe. "This student violated our learning contract. I wouldn't give him credit for the course at all. If it delays his graduation by a semester, that's too bad. There would be nothing like a hanging to focus the students' attention back into the classroom!"

It was with this conflicting advice that Benson tried to formulate an answer for McHenry.