

September 13, 2023

Mr. Jacob Harkins

Dear Mr. Harkins:

I have reviewed your grade adjudication petition of August 2023 in consultation with Dr. Dipo Onipede, Associate Director of the School of Engineering. According to Penn State Faculty Senate policy G-10: GRADE MEDIATION AND ADJUDICATION:

As stated in Senate Policy 47-20, the basis for grades is "...the instructor's judgment of the student's scholastic achievement..." Occasionally, a disagreement arises in the assignment of a grade. A student who wishes to question or challenge the grade assigned in a course must first discuss grading practices and assignments with the instructor. It is expected that the student and instructor will try to eliminate any misunderstandings and will attempt to work out any disagreements over grades. Some examples of the basis for a legitimate disagreement could include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. The instructor did not inform the student of the basis for calculation of grades as required in 47-20.
2. The instructor did not calculate the student's grade in accordance with the instructor's stated policy for calculating grades.
3. There is an error in the computation of the grade that was not corrected.
4. The student, through no fault of his or her own, was not provided with the same opportunity to complete the requirements for the course in terms, for example, of time, access to materials, or access to the instructor as the other students.

According to Penn State Faculty senate Policy 47-20: BASIS FOR GRADES:

Grades shall be assigned to individual students on the basis of the instructor's professional judgment of the student's scholastic achievement as set forth in Section 47-60. The instructor should provide written (paper or electronic form) notification of the basis for grades to students on or before the first class meeting. Any changes in that basis should likewise be presented to students in writing. Instructors also should provide evaluations of student progress in advance of the late-drop deadline in order for students to make an informed decision about ways to improve their performance or, as a last option, to late drop the course.

Your grade petition in CMPSC 122, in which you requested an adjustment from your course grade of 85.29, stems from your contention that your grade was erroneously calculated due to sixteen individual points in dispute on a subset of assignments that comprised the final grade. These assignments included the final exam. You also disputed the participation grade (10% of the final grade).

I examined the following materials while considering your appeal: 1) your statement of the situation for which you are requesting adjudication, 2) the correspondence over the points in dispute between you and Dr. Liaw, 3) the course syllabus, 4) the evaluation of the School of Engineering's subject matter expert, 5) the official statement from the School of Engineering and 6) all pertinent Penn State policies (linked or quoted in this document).

### **Points in Dispute:**

After meeting with Dr. Whitney in Academic Affairs, you expressed a desire to have an expert in computer science examine the disputed points. She conveyed this to the School of Engineering, and the school engaged a third party to review the points, noting your reasonings and the instructor's responses. The subject expert was given full access to Canvas.

The findings by the computer science expert are here:

"I have reviewed the materials and the student's work on Canvas thoroughly. I believe the grading appears to be fair and consistent with the course materials and expectations. While there can be some variability in giving partial grades for some questions, I did not find any clear instances of incorrect judgment or unfair treatment in the student's assessment" by the faculty member.

Dr. Onipede further noted that the expert "spent quite a bit of time on this." (the forensic investigation).

### **Participation:**

Concerning the issue of participation, in CMPSC 122, the syllabus states:

"Prompt and regular online participation is required to complete this course successfully. The lessons are cumulative; therefore, students must stay current with their coursework and assignments. In addition, forum discussions are encouraged. The points are assessed by the proportion of the statistics automatically recorded of accessing teaching materials for each student on Canvass, such as the time spent on the contents, number of posts viewed, and number of posts contributed. The decision on participation rests solely with the instructor. Please DO NOT request the instructor for this participation credit."

Your statement indicated:

"This is an online class. I am unsure why participation is even a grade. I wrote questions in the discussion board when I felt they could be seen by the general public, and wrote emails to the professor when I felt they were private. I was told I was supposed to "respond to other peoples questions." I feel this should be a 100, I participated where needed and should not be expected to answer other kids questions. To me it is extremely immoral and unethical to provide answers without knowing for sure you are correct or not, and goes against what I believe in. I am not going to disregard my morals and beliefs for a single class nor do I think it is appropriate for any single class to require that of me.

The subject matter expert noted that Dr. Liaw's expectations are in line with other CMPSC courses:

"While it's true that participation on the discussion boards is not mandatory, active engagement in discussions is typical for an online CMPSC course. As for the student's reluctance to answer questions posed by other students, I understand the concern. However, encouraging such interactions is a common practice to enhance the learning experience."

A Canvas review further indicated that other students responding to peers typically used this language: "I hope this helps" and "I could be wrong, but . . ." to assuage these concerns.

The School of Engineering indicated they stood behind the instructor's participation grading. I also support the finding that the instructor's expectations for participation were reasonable.

## **Conclusion**

I have concluded that Dr. Liaw abided by Penn State 47-20 policies when calculating your grade. Therefore, I find no evidence that your petition meets the criteria described in policy G-10 for adjustment. Your grade in CMPSC 122 will not be adjusted.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Greg Filbeck".

Dr. Greg Filbeck  
Interim Vice Chancellor and Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs  
Penn State Erie, The Behrend College

Cc: Dr. Ralph Ford  
Dr. Timothy Kurzweg  
Dr. Oladipo Onipede