I am going to start the story from near the end. On December 26th I received an email from a student in the Introduction to Sociology course. This is the five hundred student class that meets twice a week for lectures and once a week in small sections conducted by Teaching Assistants. The Teaching Assistants are graduate students in sociology whom the Graduate Committee decides are qualified to teach one or two of the sections. The email came from a student in section 14 which was taught by Muna Aden, a student I had lobbied for but who the graduate committee thought was not qualified. The email accused me of changing the score of the student’s second exam from 94 to 64 as a means of achieving my overall goal of lowering the grades of all the students. He further accused me for the same reason of intentionally not giving him his participation and extra credit points. The belief that I had a goal of lowering all the students’ grades and that I would change the scores of grades and intentionally not give students credit is beyond absurd. Where did this come from?

I had some idea because a few days earlier I had discovered that there was a Google Doc signed by over 150 students in my class. The document claimed that the university had taken over the evaluation process of my class because there were not enough Fs (seriously!). The document claimed that the third exam was unfair because it was more difficult that the previous two exams. And that the university had written it in order to lower all the grades. As a result of the document, I was overwhelmed with students wanting to see their exams, repeating what the document said, and questioning the legitimacy of the exam (the questions were “from the textbook” or they were “too hard”!).

It all began . . .that is one of the questions now. When did it really begin? For me it began with my acceptance of the department’s request that I teach the large introduction class. I chose to do so to help a friend and to help out the department. I would lecture twice a week and mentor eight teaching assistants, one of whom was a lead teaching assistant. I was told by the chair of the graduate committee that they were an outstanding group. I met with them, gave them an outline of my course, a job description outlining their responsibilities (which included three things: come to class, help me monitor cell phone and internet use in the large lecture, and proctor, scan and enter the exams). Because of what I was told about them, I gave them a great deal of latitude in their sections.

Looking back there were things, comments, behaviors, that I should have noticed but didn’t. They seem obvious now, though. The first thing I noticed but just for a minute and mainly way in the back of my mind was the average exam score of the second exam; it was much higher than usual, but I didn’t enter them, so I didn’t know how much higher. The second thing was a bizarre event, more obvious, but one that I did not fully understand at the time. I came to class early and looked up to see all of the TAs sitting together in the balcony. One of the things that I had asked them to do was sit around the auditorium to help monitor student behavior. I asked them to move and they did, but in the meeting that followed, one the TAs (Rebecca) said that they wanted to sit together to bond! I stood there for a second thinking what the f. .. are you talking about “bond, you can bond the whole rest of the week.” And then the real reason came out. They explained that they were instructors, not monitors, and “helping me control 500 students was not in their job description.” That is a quote. I informed them it was and that I expected them to help out in keeping students off their cell phones.

Not too long after the latter event, the graduate advisor suggested that I do evaluations of the TAs for the reappointment process. I still didn’t think any thing was really problematic, so I did the evaluations. Two things, the TAs were offended that they were evaluated even though the evaluations were quite good for all of them. But the evaluations revealed something else. They revealed that five of the TAs had created a game of jeopardy for their review session, the session the Friday before the test which was on Monday. And the game of jeopardy involved questions and answers from the second exam which they had seen. According to the students, their TAs were so wonderful because the specific questions “helped me get a perfect score.” But it actually gets worse; not all the TAs gave away questions and answers to the exams, and students in those sections complained. So we had cheating and an evaluation process that was unfair.

I then had a TA from the Introduction to Social Problems course run the statistics on the scores of the second exam. The class average was 88%, and it was only that low because of the TAs that didn’t cheat, and the typical students who don’t attend class or review and therefore get Fs. One section had a 92% average and a 94% median. Then I looked at how the same TAs were grading the assignments they were giving to their sections-all As. In those ten sections every student had an A after two thirds of the course. The other TAs were actually evaluating the work of their students.

I called a meeting, invited the Graduate Advisor and the Chair. And I confronted them with everything that I have written, without accusing them. They admitted it and said that they did it because they didn’t believe in multiple choice exams (I am not making this up!). They seemed to not understand that this could get them kicked out of the program and out of the university. (As I write this, I . . .it is beyond comprehension).

I told them that they had to have and apply criteria when grading the assignments they gave out. And I made each of them promise that they would actually grade the assignments. And I told them they could play jeopardy but that they could not see the third exam (in retrospect the department should have threatened them with expulsion if they engaged in any type of negative behavior).

What happened next is beyond anything that I could imagine. Two of the TAs, maybe three, talked to the students about the meeting and lied to them. They told their students that they all had been fired. They had been fired because the class grade average was too high. These lies spread to all of the sections, so 500 students believed that their “beloved” TAs had been fired. This made lecturing, which is never easy in an auditorium, a real thrill for me. But there was something else. Attendance dropped by one-half after the second exam. My assumption is that the students believed that they would get the answers in the review session before the third exam. That, of course, wasn’t going to happen. And I told the students who did come to lecture multiple times that they would need to read the text and attend class.

Of course, the average for the third exam was not 88%; it was 65%. Not coming to class, not reading the assignments, and not having the questions given to you have consequences. This is where the Google doc comes and the accusation come in. The same TAs that lied about the meeting lied about the exam. They told the students the administration had written the exam to make sure more students failed the course (I curved the exam to 78% and the class average was 3.03, hardly anyone failed). So a student started the doc and 150 students signed and were going to bring it to me in protest. I talked to the person who started it and explained, but who knows. The lies are also the reason that the student accused me of manipulation his grade. In looking into the accusation that I manipulated the grade of the one student, I discovered that the TA who was entering the grades (all 500) had mistakenly entered a third exam score in the second exam column (It is had to believe someone would make a mistake when entering 500 grades, actually, she entered 738 that day!) And when checking his extra credit and participation, it was obvious that he had gotten the points.

But it didn’t stop there. The TAs talked to any graduate student who they thought might apply to be TAs in the spring and were successful in discouraging several. We have the minimal number of graduate students.

One of the main reasons that this has been very difficult and problematic is that my three year contract expires in February and the fall semester will be one of the determining factors in it being renewed. There are other reasons as important. One is the lack of support from the department. They took no action. In fact, three of the TAs who caused the most trouble have been hired by the department in other positions.

As of January 2nd I was able to see the student evaluations for the course. This is important for the reappointment. I was worried that they would be very, very low. But they were not low at all. The students had positive things to say about the lectures, but there was a lot about “firing TAs” and “hard exams”! Sorry if this bored you.