



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## *In Their Words . . . Students' Ideas*

### *About Teaching*

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As one way to foster a dialogue about teaching and learning between undergraduate students and the teaching community, the TRC has established an ongoing series entitled "Undergraduate Student Focus Group on Teaching and Learning." Each month we invite a cross-section of about ten undergraduates to meet at the TRC to discuss various aspects of teaching and learning.

### **"Making the Grade"**

How can we help our students improve their test performance and writing skills? Do they really pay attention to our comments? What types of feedback work best? Do students perceive our grading policies as fair or even understand them? We asked a group of undergraduates from the College of Arts and Sciences to share their views on grading. Their answers reflect a desire to learn and to improve their skills.

We first considered testing. Our participants agreed that although scantron tests can be effective in large classes that focus on factual information and do allow for quicker feedback to students, short answer/essay formats allow them to contribute more of their knowledge on a given topic. In general, our group found that they understand and retain information better when they have to synthesize it. They also suggested replacing the standard mid-term exam with a couple of tests throughout the semester, each placed after about five or six weeks of study.

Students appreciate chances to receive feedback on short written assignments relatively early in the semester; that way, they learn how to improve their work and earn a better grade at the same time. Thus they would prefer to receive comments and grades on smaller assignments before tackling a heavily weighted paper due later in the semester.

Students are equally concerned about knowing how their discussion comments are received. Participants in this focus group welcome opportunities for open intellectual discussion, although some have sensed that in some classes the only way to receive a high grade is to conform their opinions to those of the instructor. They would like to know explicitly that divergent opinions are welcome in class. Clear

communication regarding discussion guidelines would deter such notions.

Constructive feedback on tests and papers helps students improve their writing and directs them to work on weak areas. Comments need to be detailed, specific, and constructive, rather than one-word marginal notations. One successful model mentioned included both marginal comments on form and content as well as a closing paragraph of summary remarks. Students appreciate knowing what they are doing right in addition to what they can improve.

Students appreciate syllabi that include a breakdown of how the course grade will be tabulated. Most beneficial are those that also include the criteria for grading, i.e., how each component is graded: what "counts" in a discussion section, lab, or lecture. Our group questioned the value of curving grades, noting that it may foster competition among students instead of acquisition of knowledge. One participant related a system that seemed effective: he received a grade for his work, as well as a description of his standing in the class with regards to that grade.

In general, this group agreed that clear communication between teachers and students with regard to grading policies and expectations allows them to prioritize their studies and assignments. Concise yet detailed feedback helps them improve their writing and determine areas where they need to concentrate more.