

The Assignment of Course Grades and Student Appeals

The statement that follows was approved by the Association's Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure in June 1997, and further revised by Committee A in June 1998.

The American Association of University Professors regularly receives inquiries concerning the right of instructors to assign course grades to students, the right of students to challenge the assigned grades, and the circumstances and procedures under which student appeals should be made. The Association's Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure has approved the issuance of general guidelines on this subject. The following statement is intended to guide faculty members, administrators, and students with respect to the assignment of student grades and student appeals.

The Right of an Instructor to Assign Grades

The Association's *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* places primary responsibility with the faculty "for such fundamental areas as curriculum [and] subject matter and methods of instruction."¹ The assessment of student academic performance, it follows, including the assignment of particular grades, is a faculty responsibility. Recognizing the authority of the instructor of record to evaluate the academic performance of students enrolled in a course he or she is teaching is a direct corollary of the instructor's "freedom in the classroom" that the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* assures.² The faculty member offering the course, it follows, should be responsible for the evaluation of student course work and, under normal circumstances, is the sole judge of the grades received by the students in that course.

The Right of a Student to Appeal

According to the Association's *Statement on Professional Ethics*, "professors make every reasonable effort . . . to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit."³ The academic community proceeds under the strong presumption that the instructor's evaluations are authoritative. At the same time, of course, situations do arise in which a student alleges that a grade he or she has received is wrong, and the *Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students* provides that "students should have protection through orderly procedures against prejudiced or capricious academic evaluation."⁴ A suitable mechanism for appeal, one which respects both the prerogatives of instructors and the rights of students in this regard, should thus be available for reviewing allegations that inappropriate criteria were used in determining the grade or that the instructor did not adhere to stated procedures or grading standards.⁵

Under no circumstances should administrative officers on their own authority substitute their judgment for that of the faculty concerning the assignment of a grade. The review of a student complaint over a grade should be by faculty, under procedures adopted by faculty, and any resulting change in a grade should be by faculty authorization.

Procedures for Appeal

Committee A offers the following, not as a single procedure for grade appeals that all should follow, but as recommended procedural considerations.

1. A student who wishes to complain about a grade would be expected to discuss the matter first with the course instructor, doing so as soon as possible after receiving the grade.
2. The instructor should be willing to listen, to provide explanation, and to be receptive to changing the grade if the student provides convincing argument for doing so. (In most

cases the discussion between the student and the instructor should suffice and the matter should not need to be carried further.)

3. If, after the discussion with the instructor, the student's concerns remain unresolved, the student might then approach the instructor's department chair or another member of the faculty who is the instructor's immediate administrative superior. That person, if he or she believes that the complaint may have merit, would be expected to discuss it with the instructor. If the matter still remains unresolved, it should be referred to an ad hoc faculty committee.
4. The ad hoc committee would ordinarily be composed of faculty members in the instructor's department or in closely allied fields. The committee would examine available written information on the dispute, would be available for meetings with the student and with the instructor, and would meet with others as it sees fit.
5. If the faculty committee, through its inquiries and deliberations, determines that compelling reasons exist to change the grade, it would request that the instructor make the change, providing the instructor with a written explanation of its reasons. Should the instructor decline, he or she should provide an explanation for refusing.
6. The faculty committee, after considering the instructor's explanation, and upon concluding that it would be unjust to allow the original grade to stand, may then recommend to the department head or to the instructor's immediate administrative superior that the grade be changed. That individual will provide the instructor with a copy of the recommendation and will ask the instructor to implement it. If the instructor continues to decline, that individual may then change the grade, notifying the instructor and the student of this action. Only that individual, upon the written recommendation of the faculty committee, should have the authority to effect a change in grade over the objection of the instructor who assigned the original grade.

Notes

1. AAUP, *Policy Documents and Reports*, 10th ed. (Washington, D.C., 2006), 139.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 171.
4. *Ibid.*, 274.
5. Institutions receiving federal funds are required to provide procedures by which students can challenge grades that they believe may have been tainted by gender or disability discrimination. See, e.g., 34 CFR Sections 106.8 and 104.7 and 28 CFR Section 35.107. The *Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance*, issued by the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in 2001, provides information on the necessary components of such procedures. The OCR guidance is available online at www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/shguide.pdf. Such grievance procedures are also recommended to address allegations of race and national-origin discrimination. See *Protecting Students from Harassment and Hate Crimes: A Guide for Schools* (1999), 16. This publication, a joint effort of the OCR and the National Association of Attorneys General, is available online at www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/archives/Harassment/harassment.pdf.