

It's now May and we are reaching the end of the academic year. Final examinations are in the offing as students hurry to finish term papers and final projects. The library will be open 24 hours, and I'm sure that sales of coffee, NoDoz, and caffeine-based energy drinks will increase at campuses around the country.

For professors, the end of the semester forces tasks I don't particularly enjoy, namely that of assigning grades. Both universities where I teach utilize traditional grading systems: students are assigned an "A," "B," "C," "D" or the dreaded "F". "Plus-minus" adds additional delineation to the traditional grading structure.

Grading, by definition, is about discrimination. Students who do superior work deserve the highest grades, where the middle grades are reserved for average students. It falls upon the professor to assign grades in a fair and equitable manner.

Essentially, there are two things that I dislike about the structure, and both have to do with many students' attitudes about grading. The first is that somewhere along the line, many students equate meeting the class requirements with deserving superior grades. They feel that by simply meeting expectations, an "A" is in order, and expected. In academia, this is called "grade inflation." It's almost as though these students feel you begin the semester with an "A" and work down from there, not that you start with a zero and your work builds up to the grade earned.

Although psychology is far from my area of expertise, I attribute this attitude to self-esteem efforts throughout primary and secondary schools. For example, my children, like many grade school children, have participated in organized sports in the town recreational league. At the end of the respective season, each participant receives the same trophy, whether the team won anything or not. Indeed, even if a player never attended a practice and missed several games, they would receive the same trophy as the best player on an undefeated team who attended and played diligently.

At the risk of sounding like my father, this contrasts to my youth experience where, even as a grade school youngster, you had to "try-out" and "make" the team, and then only the championship winners were awarded trophies. If you came in second, you went home with nothing other than the reward of having competed. If you didn't make the team in the first place, you went home with even less.

While the benefits of building the self-esteem of grade schoolers is important, at some point the transition needs to be made to the cold, hard realities of the business world. Enter the university experience.

The second troublesome attitude many students possess is that the grade is viewed as the *objective* of the class. This misses the entire point; the focus of the class should be on learning the subject matter,

not on receiving a grade. If a student learns and receives an average grade, they aren't much further ahead than if they didn't learn a thing and received an "A."

I often tell students that five years after graduation no one will care about the grade point average (GPA), only their demonstrated knowledge. While it is nice to have a "trophy" grade, and a letter recognizing that you are on the Dean's List, these rewards pale compared to the reward of knowledge gained. This only comes from recognizing that their grade is not an end unto itself, but rather a by-product of the knowledge and experience gained in the course.

It is unfortunate that some student view their College experience as an end, they do not see beyond receiving their degree. The trouble with this approach is what I call the "Now, what?" syndrome. If they put all their efforts into getting a good grade, rather than learning, they will not be as well-equipped as they should be for the workforce. As a result, their ability to obtain and maintain meaningful employment will be stymied by their college approach. A better tactic would be to soak up the knowledge offered and view this knowledge as its own reward.

The business-world equivalent to the academic grade is the performance review. Although many management books and techniques extol the values of this exercise, it is often dreaded by both employee and manager.

Like the grade in the academic experience, receiving a good review on the job should be the by-product of actually doing a good job. For example, our legal system is clogged with business people who, in wanton pursuit of their objectives, make business decisions that are questionable at best, unethical and illegal at worst. Stories of price fixing, kickbacks, and "creative" accounting practices too often dominate headlines, and it is well-known that our industry is not immune to these scandals. I'm sure that if confronted. The individuals responsible for these deplorable decisions would often site their short-term objectives as the reason behind their actions.

It is important to approach any performance evaluation, in the business world or in academia, as part of the experience. Differentiate the evaluation from being about "you" to being about "what you made" or "what you did." By putting your efforts into doing a good job, the grades, or review, will take care of themselves.