

## Are There Any Questions?

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Although I have spent my career teaching mathematics, this article has nothing to do with mathematics. It is about teaching and learning, and it can be applied to an English, history or math class.

It should be said at the beginning that I have done no extensive survey. The observations herein are based on recent experiences at three universities, and these observations do no more than invite a response from anyone reading this.

Start at the top and call it trickle-down economics. At University X, Y or Z, the administration (president, vice-president, provost) receives statistics that generate frowns. Our students are dropping out or transferring, and we need to act. The initiative will always come from the administration. For the faculty, attrition is normal—nothing unusual, nothing noteworthy. For the administration, it means losing dollars, and that is always noteworthy, even if the current statistics are in line with the average over the past 10 years.

What to do? The provost calls a meeting of the deans. The deans call meetings with the department chairs. The chairs call departmental meetings. In the meantime, a new office has been created: the Office of Retention.

Back to the departmental meetings. The discussion goes as follows:

CHAIR. We have a problem. It's called retention.

FACULTY MEMBER. Over the last 10 years, my grade distribution has been pretty much the same.

CHAIR. That doesn't make it good.

FACULTY MEMBER. Do you mean all my Fs and Ds should have been Bs and As?

CHAIR. Somewhat.

FACULTY MEMBER. What have I been doing wrong?

CHAIR. You need to be more responsible for the performance of your students.

FACULTY MEMBER. Do you mean that if a student really doesn't want to be in this class, or even at this university, it is my responsibility to convince him otherwise?

CHAIR. At least try to increase his motivation in order to give your class a chance for success.

And so it goes. There are lots of reasons a student does poorly. Here are a few:

- "I never was interested in academics, but I'm not ready to be independent of Mom and Dad. It's a scary thing leaving home and being on my own."
- "Peer pressure is what put me in university."
- "My parents would only support me if I went to university."
- "I'm here, but I really don't know what I want to do."
- "I have a positive attitude about every form of entertainment you can imagine."

From my tone, you may think that I disagree with the thinking of the administration. To the contrary, I have nothing against a professor trying to give students more motivation to do well and remain at the university. If a student's grade is A, B or C, the student leaves the class with a better attitude than if it were F or D.

So what are professors to do in order to increase interest and motivation that they haven't already been doing over the past 15 years? That brings us to the main object of this note. I have seen an increase in making homework part of the student's grade. The professor collects homework (say, once a week) and uses it to determine a percentage of the grade. There's nothing wrong with this. But what I have seen is a weekly assignment being given and then collected one week later. There is no work done to cover that day's lecture and, consequently, the professor never opens the next class asking, "Are there any questions?" Even on the day the assignments are collected, the professor does not ask for questions.

What is wrong with this picture? From the student's point of view, it is the lack of daily motivation—that is, "Give me something that will motivate me to think about today's lecture. And when I return, ask me if I have questions. I almost certainly will."

And so this note ends with an appeal to professors who use homework as part of the grade: do a mixture. Provide work to be done after today's lecture and discussed at the next class, as well as work to be collected over some time period.