

WHEN STUDENTS THINK WE ARE MEAN

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A young physics teacher sent an e-mail message to a physics list server asking for advice. She said her students perceived her as uncaring and mean. It is difficult to analyze the situation from a distance, but I can identify with that problem many times over. I speak partly from personal experience from my early days of teaching, and also from many years as department chair where I have dealt with students complaining to me about other faculty members in the department being uncaring and mean. The advice I give is for all teachers who might find themselves in a similar situation.

MAJOR POINT

I believe it doesn't matter how well you know the field, how well you prepare the curriculum, how well you deliver lectures, how well your labs integrate into the course, how well you write tests, etc. None of this matters if the students think you are uncaring and mean. Stated in another way, students must believe you have their best interests at the core of your mission. You are there to help them learn the material and succeed with their goals. If they cannot see you in that light, then you're in for a long haul.

REPEAT THE LAST TWO SENTENCES

You are there to help them learn the material and succeed with their goals. If they cannot see you in that light, then you're in for a long haul.

This doesn't mean you give them grades they don't deserve. This doesn't mean you water down the material. You must cover the material and you must hold students to a standard. Some students will fail. But while all this is transpiring students must trust you are not an adversary; they must view you as an advocate.

HOW DO YOU PULL THIS OFF?

This is especially difficult today when so many students equate caring, friendly, advocate with "easy." That's the trick, isn't it... getting students to realize you are friendly and caring and you have their interests in mind, yet at the same time delivering a legitimate program at the appropriate level of rigor.

Here are some thoughts on this. These are not in any particular order.

1. Be sure to be fair and even handed with all students. When my evaluations say, "Professor Edmiston is a hard prof, but he is fair" then I know I am on the right track. The poorer students dare not think I like the better students more, or I give the better students advantages. If a better student gives a poor answer, and a struggling student gives an equally poor answer, I dare not give more points or respond more positively to the better student because I think, "Well, she really knows better." I dare not act more positive in class toward the better students and more abrupt with the poorer students.
2. Fair also means I listen to students if they think I have graded them incorrectly or too harshly. This doesn't mean I will cave in to their requests for more points, but I will listen to their complaints and I will take time to explain why I did what I did. Sometimes I do

make errors, and as soon as I realize I have made an error I admit it. I don't try to save my professorial face and make excuses. I apologize, fix the error, and thank the student for pointing it out to me.

I keep track of statistics for each question on each exam. Sometimes I will take the time to discuss a class-wide problem with the class. "Only 20% of you got problem 14 correct. Let's talk about this and see what the problem was. Did you not understand the question or did you not know the answer." In the beginning they might all try to say the question was confusing, but I don't let them off that easy. They quickly learn that my next response will be, "How would you have worded the question, or how would you have tried to assess the class understanding of this concept." We can't spend much time doing this, but even doing this a little bit shows the class that you are trying to understand what happened to make the whole class miss a question so badly. Sometimes I find the question really is confusing, or I find the whole class indeed has a misconception of some basic physics principles. I can't go back over the material at this point; we must move on, but I will try it differently next year. More important, students see me trying to understand their problems.

3. Make sure to invite all students to confer with you, but especially go out of your way to get the struggling students into your office. You may have to break the ice by starting to talk to them as they are leaving class. Or if you see them in the lobby, sit down and start talking to them. Ask them about their goals and why they are your class.

If you are in your office or another private place, they will probably tell you what grade they think they need (to keep a scholarship or to get into medical school, etc.) but if they don't volunteer that information then ask. Just be direct... "What grade are you hoping to get in this class?"

If they have an unrealistic goal, don't initially balk, but don't make unrealistic promises either. "You want an A. Well, I'm sure you're capable of doing A work in this class, but we both know that isn't happening right now. Let's see if we can figure out why that is." Then talk about study habits, class attendance, what grades they've gotten in other classes, etc. but the most important thing is to see if we can identify the biggest problem they are having in my class. Then we try to come up with a plan to improve this.

I don't make deals. I don't say "You will get a B if you do this."

I don't give extra credit assignments.

If the student needs help studying for exams or working on assigned problems, I try to find a tutor. If the student has trouble writing lab reports, and the problem is grammar, proofreading, etc. I make arrangements for them to get their lab report to the writing lab so tutors can work with them. I point out that this requires a first draft at least a day before the report is due.

If students are having problems with the science part of lab reports I offer to skim the report day or two before it is due and point out problem areas. Early skimming of lab reports sounds like a big effort, but it is not. A major benefit is getting them to write the report before it is due so they can make a second draft. Otherwise they turn in the first draft on the due date, and that draft probably got printed at 3:00 AM the night before. Simply getting them to have the first draft ready a day early, and having them view it as

a first draft is a major accomplishment and well worth the effort. Any time I spend skimming the report and making a few suggestions is repaid many times over by a much easier to grade lab report turned in on the due date. Also, students only do this a few times then realize they don't really need me. In a class of 25 students I will have four or five students take advantage of this offer, and they only do it for the first three or four reports. But most of all, knowing this service is available helps students realize I am there to help them succeed.

4. I try to be happy. This is often very hard for me, especially when I am mired in political hassles at the college. But problems with the administration are not the students' fault. Also, my calculus based physics class has been at 8:00 AM five days a week the whole 24 years I have been here. That is really tough. But I try real hard not to be a grouch.
5. As you try to be friendly, do not become a friend. I'm 52 years old and most students are 19. They're probably not going to try to be friends with me because of the age difference. But I see younger profs fall into the trap of trying to be friends with students, and then either (a) the students don't understand what happened when they get a bad grade, or (b) the professor has to sacrifice integrity to maintain a friendship. I will joke around with students; I will ask them about themselves; I will try real hard to make them view me as a human being while also convincing them I view them as human beings. Yet, I try to maintain the posture that I am the professor and they are the students. This is a difficult balancing act, but worth striving for. If students view you as a friendly and caring mentor (not friend) then you should be able to get them to perform better, or at least accept the blame for poor performance. When things go badly for them I tell them I am sorry, and I think they know I am sincere. When things go well for them I compliment them and tell them I am happy for them.

SUMMARY

I could make more suggestions; perhaps I've missed some important ones, but these are enough to show there are things you can do to make students realize you are there to help them, yet you do not have to sacrifice your integrity. It doesn't work with everyone. A few students still get D and F grades in my classes. But enough students realize I am there to help them, and I am approachable, that even those who fail typically accept the blame for their failure. Many who originally hoped for an A will take a B or C and feel okay about it. Those who get the A know that they really accomplished something.