



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

WMU President Diether Haenicke

Office of the President

4-22-2009

There's no absolution or negotiation as grades are not given, they are earned

Diether Haenicke
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/haenicke>



Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "There's no absolution or negotiation as grades are not given, they are earned" (2009).
WMU President Diether Haenicke. 33.
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/haenicke/33>

This Newspaper Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WMU President Diether Haenicke by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.





There's no absolution or negotiation as grades are not given, they are earned

By Diether Haenicke
April 22, 2009

The telephone keeps ringing, the e-mail overflows, and for the first time during the semester my office hours are really busy -- it is finals week. Only a few more nights before the last exam; and just as in the Bible: The sins of the past haunt the sinner on Judgment Day, and there is much howling and gnashing of teeth. A few nights of cramming won't make up for solid, regular study throughout the semester. Therefore, one after another sleep-deprived and irrationally hopeful student shows up at my doorstep seeking belated guidance toward a passing grade. Others seek an audience to offer pieces of outstanding contemporary fiction as to what afflictions and what incomparable blows of fate have befallen them during the semester. Others yet turn my office into a confessional and freely admit their sins, pleading for forgiveness.

I love the stories my students invent or embellish. Most are better than the ones I remember from my own student days. But my students deal with a teacher of literature who, while he loves a good story, also recognizes fiction when he sees it. I am less comfortable in the confessional. While I am great on forgiveness, I don't have the power to absolve the sinners and must remind them that I give grades, not absolution.

It is amazing how many students think teachers can "give" them a grade just to be of help. They point an accusing eye at the professor and reveal that all scholarship support will be lost and the student be made destitute if the insensitive and cold-hearted instructor does not dole out the needed grade. But I don't go on guilt trips for which I haven't booked passage myself, and I certainly don't take any responsibility if a student's laziness leads to his loss of money.

Other students think grades are a negotiable commodity. They put on their best salesman faces, fully convinced that a win-win situation can be developed if both parties

are willing to deal. A particularly insistent one told me that President Floyd had declared Western to be a "student-centered" university. Would I please be more accommodating? To the student's credit, though, his remark was tongue in cheek. As the old joke goes: "What's the difference between a professor and a terrorist?" Answer: "You can negotiate with a terrorist."

I agree that we make perhaps too much of testing and grades. But a grade is a professional judgment, a seal of quality. By giving a grade, I attest to the student's ability to perform on a given level. I am telling a future employer or a graduate or professional school how well this student has mastered a given subject. It is a judgment on which I stake my professional reputation. That's why there can be neither negotiation nor absolution.

Thank heavens, most students do not need to resort to deals, confession or fiction to end the semester with a good grade. I am always impressed that most of them are very responsible and determined to do well academically. They make my work in the classroom a pleasure, and I feel rewarded when the academic outcome of a semester results in good grades for my students.

But even those who struggle academically, play too much, don't find their focus in their freshman year, or who need a lot of help and guidance have my full attention, perhaps even more than those who sail through their four undergraduate years without shipwreck. My friend Kathy Brady often remarks: "Everybody is someone's little boy or girl." I love that observation because it reminds me that we are not only teachers but also parents and would like our own children treated with love and understanding by others. I try to look at my students with the eyes of their parents.

The older I get and the longer I teach, the more I have come to believe that those who teach must love those whom they teach. And that includes tough love and bad grades, if necessary.

*This column was first published Dec. 13, 2000 in the Kalamazoo Gazette
mlive.com/kalamazoo*