

# 'A' for effort? Not in my class

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Even now, more than 20 years later, I clearly recall the student's anger as she flung the red-inked essay across my desk and screamed that she had "worked too hard" for the grade of C. It was the first time a college student had so vehemently challenged a grade I had given on a writing assignment. It would not be the last.

Along with being startled, I wondered if I was in danger of bodily harm. The student, a freshman, continued to scream, saying her parents would kill her if she earned anything less than a B. She had been an honor student in high school, she said, and demanded that I change the grade. I explained that her writing was undistinguished, merely satisfying the standard — "average" — requirements of an expository essay. I did not change her grade. The term was young enough for her to withdraw from my class and find another.

When I told colleagues about the incident, I was surprised that all of them had similar experiences. Over time, I came to expect students to challenge lower-than-expected grades solely on the basis of having "worked hard" and having satisfied the basic requirements.

A recent *New York Times* article [shed light on the increasing problem](#) by summarizing a study, "Self-Entitled College Students: Contributions of Personality, Parenting, and Motivational Factors," that was published last year in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. I read the study, and it confirms everything my colleagues and I had discovered years ago by way of sharing anecdotes.

Conducted by researchers for the University of California, Irvine, the study reports that many of the students surveyed, a diverse group that included East and Southeast Asian Americans, Caucasians, Latinos and other groups, expected B's because they attended class. A larger number expected B's for having read the assigned material.

The researchers, professors themselves, looked for the sources of this growing trend of entitlement among students. More than any other factors, they found that pressure from parents and competition among peers and relatives have given students a greater sense of what is referred to as "achievement anxiety."

Other researchers in education and the behavioral sciences also have been looking into the causes of the phenomenon. Some have traced it back to students' experiences in their K-12 classrooms, where they are bombarded with high-stakes tests that determine if they move to the next level — or even graduate from kindergarten. One result is that they have become exceptionally skilled at preparing for tests, producing a level of efficiency that encourages these young people to search for what one professor calls "a magic formula to get high scores."

When such formulas get students high scores in K-12, the expectation of high scores follows far too many freshmen into the college classroom. This expectation has become a new religion, a very real and perhaps harmful sense of entitlement.

As my colleagues and I had experienced, the study shows that the rising sense of entitlement creates, among other negative problems, selfishness, unrealistic and demanding attitudes toward professors, exploitation of peers and university staff members,

narcissism and, of course, various forms of academic dishonesty.

A University of Maryland senior who spoke to the *New York Times* is a poster child for the academically entitled college student. "I think putting in a lot of effort should merit a high grade," he said. "What else is there really than the effort that you put in? If you put in all the effort you have and get a C, what is the point? If someone goes to every class and reads every chapter in the book and does everything the teacher asks of them and more, they should be getting an A like their effort deserves. If your maximum effort can only be average in a teacher's mind, then something is wrong."

Obviously, I disagree. Putting in your maximum effort does not always produce levels of excellence that deserve the highest grade. As my colleagues and I reminded many disgruntled students, you should want to explore ideas, test new techniques and expand your knowledge.

You should set aside the need to be instantly rewarded with a mere grade for effort. Enlightenment should be your goal. And yes, you can call me out of step and old-fashioned.