The Extra-Credit Question: Should You Offer It or Resist?

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By Dana S. Dunn

It may be the most easily predictable behavior in the undergraduate repertoire. Toward the end of every semester comes the clarion call: "Is there any extra credit I can do to help my final grade?"

Sometimes the request has a desperate tone. The student recognizes that failure is looming and hopes to avert a dire outcome. In contrast, a student in good standing may be looking for any extra work that could inch their GPA upward. Minimally, if other instructors in your department offer extra-credit options, your students will expect you to do the same and may judge you harshly if you don't.

Plenty of faculty members, however, resist the practice — for a variety of sound reasons:

- They already designed — very intentionally — a grading rubric for the course, with a finite universe of what is quantitatively possible.
- They regard extra credit as a "high-school practice."
- They think it contributes to grade inflation, producing a point distribution that falsely represents what students achieved in the course.
- They believe that extra credit, paradoxically, discourages students from doing their best work on regular assignments, since students may think a lackluster performance can be salvaged through extra credit.
- They fear that extra-credit assignments would be marginal activities that contribute little

to a student's substantive learning.
- They see the whole enterprise as an unjustified administrative burden, since few students will actually experience a grade change as a result of extra credit.

In contrast to such hard-line stances, other faculty members have accepted that extra credit is simply part of the contemporary educational landscape. Knowing that it's expected, some instructors offer it — also for a variety of sound reasons:

- They see an extra-credit assignment as just another way to reinforce the learning goals of the course. They design it with intention and include it formally on the syllabus.
- They use extra credit to motivate students to attend events, talks, performances, or films that they might not otherwise see.
- They allow students to revise a paper, and recapture lost points, because it encourages them to keep improving their writing.
- They understand that extra credit might alleviate stress for students who are taking a course outside of their intellectual comfort zone and want a bit of insurance in case a test goes badly.
- They recognize that extra-credit options will not appeal to all students but can reveal things about them — such as which ones have real enthusiasm for the subject and which ones need extra help. For a student on the borderline between two grades, completing the optional assignment signals that the student wants to do better, and may justify the higher grade.
- They grant extra credit to acknowledge valuable contributions to class discussion. In psychology, students may routinely get extra credit for participating in the subject pool run by the department.

Is extra credit educationally beneficial?

It can be. You may be introducing students to a new world when you offer them additional points to attend an orchestral concert. They may learn they actually like classical music. In effect, extra credit can help them discover interests they didn't know they had. Yet that outcome can feel like a Pyrrhic victory of sorts, since educators actually want students to pursue interests that are intrinsically motivating to *them.* Extra credit is an extrinsic carrot that renders a compelled attendance at *King Lear* a somewhat hollow exercise.

Likewise, extra credit can seem educationally questionable when it mostly benefits you or the institution — for example, the recent, and somewhat controversial, practice of awarding points to students for completing course evaluations at the end of the term. (How it works: If more than 70 percent of students complete an evaluation, they all earn a bonus point; if more than 80 percent do, the reward goes up to two points; and so on.) Sure, it might lead to a robust response rate, but critics might legitimately argue that the points bear little relation to student learning.

For those of you in favor of extra credit as a grading or teaching tool, there are ways to built it

into your course design fairly and effectively. Here are eight strategies that have worked for us:

Make sure the assignments actually serve course objectives. If promoting editing and rewrites is important to your course, then it makes sense to offer credit for additional polishing. If you believe it might enrich students' learning to go to events related to course themes, then it's valid to use extra credit to encourage their attendance. Provide examples in the syllabus about the kinds of events that will qualify and explain their connection to the course context. If you can't make a clear connection, rethink the offer.

Set a maximum percentage of extra-credit points that can be earned. This will help you avoid grade inflation. For example, if your course is structured so that students can earn a maximum of 500 points, you might stipulate that no more than 2 percent (or 10 points) can be earned through extra-credit work. Identifying a specific, small range encourages students to be thoughtful about the options they pick — and realistic about how much it will affect their grade.

Specify your extra-credit practices in the syllabus. And spell out your policies, and the rationale behind them, on the first day of class. There are students who work harder for a few minor points on an optional exercise instead of investing their time on required papers and exams where the payoff would be greater. Help students understand that, in most cases, extra credit will not move them up a grade: It won't salvage a poor performance and should not be used to build artificially high grades; at best, extra credit is borderline insurance.

Trust but verify. If students can earn extra points by seeking help from the campus writing center, ask them to show that they met with one of its staff members. If you offer extra credit for attendance at campus events, you will need to do more than just list which ones qualify. To avoid students checking in to the event, and then skipping out, ask them to turn in a short paper about it or a selfie taken there, along with their ticket or the signature of an event organizer. Require them to turn it in within a week of the event (so that you aren't overburdened with a stack of extra papers to grade all at once at the semester's end).

Double-check final grades to make sure you've included the extra points. The end of a semester is hectic for everyone. And because extra-credit activities tend to be irregular occurrences, they can get accidentally left out of your grading calculations. To save yourself the extra ordeal of filing grade changes linked to missing and challenged extra-credit scores, double (or triple) check your records before hitting submit to the grade overlords. If your temperament is ill-suited to managing potentially chaotic or irregular conditions, then extra credit is not for you.

Reject last-minute appeals. Some students will ask to earn extra credit at the 11th hour — or even later, once their final grade is already set. Their timing is exquisitely bad, and they probably neglected to take advantage of the extra-credit assignments that you did offer. There is no compelling reason for you to give additional options. However, these students also don't recognize the inherent unfairness of asking for special consideration to be bailed out of an

unsatisfactory grade. Kindly explain that you cannot provide an opportunity to one student in a course without extending it to all of them, making this last-ditch appeal both ethically and administratively untenable.

Use grade grubbing as a teachable moment. All too often, the students who are already doing well — or even excelling — are the ones most likely to jump on extra-credit opportunities that they really don't need. Giving all students a sense of where they stand, grade-wise, throughout the course may help them make judicious decisions about how hard to work on regular assignments and how much extra-credit work to do (if any).

Just say "no." The proliferation of extra credit does pose problems for educators. It may be difficult to stand your ground and restrict grades to the ones you've outlined in the syllabus when colleagues are doling out freebies all around you. But keep in mind: Extra-credit options can add a substantial burden to your workload with very little payoff for students. Despite their enthusiasm for extra credit, its impact on their learning is often illusory. So if an extra-credit option is not going to help them much, and it's going to burden you, resist the pressure and stick to your course plans.

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