

MAKING THE GRADE

Dawn Sizemore Traynor
University of South Carolina

Stephanie Ganser
Wake Forest University

When Rachel, a first year S100 teacher is confronted by a difficult decision, she must weigh fairness to all students versus and individual students extenuating circumstances. How flexible should an instructor be with one student without being unfair to the rest of the class? Should a student's personal circumstances be taken into consideration when enforcing policies and assigning grades?

INTRODUCTION

Rachel sat in her office, staring at the computer screen. As she read the email over again, her emotions ranged from confusion to frustration to guilt. How flexible could she be with one student without being unfair to the other students? And how much of a student's personal circumstances could she take into consideration when enforcing policies and assigning grades? She held her head in her hands and thought "What do I do now?"

THE PROTAGONIST

Rachel was an outgoing and thoughtful professional staff member at Midwest State University. She enjoyed being around people and, more than anything, she loved helping students discover their potential to be successful in whatever ways they dreamed possible. She was most passionate about working with underprivileged students, and the students other people had given up on.

Rachel earned her Bachelor's degree in English Education from a small private liberal arts college in the northeast. She then went straight to graduate school and earned a Master of Arts in English from a large public school on the east coast. After graduating and teaching 7th and 8th grade English for two years at a suburban middle school, Rachel knew that something was missing for her in her current position. Rachel left teaching and enrolled full-time at Midwest State University, ultimately earning a Master of Education degree, specializing in College Student Personnel (CSP). The CSP pro-

gram focuses on using experiential learning to prepare its students for their professional futures. Rachel worked 20 hours each week in the Career Center during her first year and a half of graduate school. She also co-taught State 100 with a professional staff member during the fall semester of her second year in the CSP program. During her second year of graduate school, an opening became available in the Center for Success as an academic pick because of her experience in the CSP program, her range of academic and professional experiences, and her obvious passion for working with students. She was hired and started her professional role while she was still a graduate student, and both worked and went to school full-time for the five months until she graduated.

Several months later, Rachel was given the opportunity to teach a section of State 100 on her own, and she was very excited for this new experience. After working as a graduate teaching assistant and teaching middle school English for two years each, Rachel was confident in her teaching abilities and ready to get back into a classroom setting. She spent all summer preparing for the course, and was thrilled when the class began in August.

THE INSTITUTION

Midwest State University (MSU) is an educational institution built on tradition. Established in the early 1800s, MSU has been the state leader in educating students, conducting research, and establishing community partnerships. Growing from a one-building campus to a multi-campus university system, MSU grants degrees from over 300 different majors within 14 colleges and schools. Any incoming student can find a major that highlights their interests and talents. MSU's main campus is a large public institution with over 24,000 undergraduate students and 10,000 graduate students enrolled each year.

THE S100 CLASS

State 100 (S100) was a three-credit course at Midwest State University. S100 was not a mandatory course for first-year students, but over 90 percent of each incoming class at MSU enrolled in S100. MSU boasted a nationally recognized center for first-year students, and has had one of the nation's flagship programs for the first-year experience since the program was founded over 30 years ago. S100 was not the typical lecture class, as most learning occurred outside of the classroom walls. Tours at the football stadium, relaxation techniques in the counseling center, guest speakers, and scavenger hunts were included among the typical reflection papers, presentations, and required reading. Just like all MSU courses, attendance was mandatory and students who miss more than 10% of their classes may automatically fail the course. There were over 150 sections of S100 so the class sizes were kept small, averaging about 20 students per class. Within this small class setting, students collaborated on projects, engaged in thoughtful discussions, and the instructor was able to give special attention to each student. It was

common for instructors to give their email addresses and cell phone numbers to their students in case the students needed to reach them. While MSU was a large institution, S100 was a place where students knew each others' names and instructors reached out if students were struggling in class.

THE STUDENT

Brandon Jenkins was a first-generation college student who had just begun his first semester at MSU as a criminal justice major. His parents were divorced and, growing up, he split his time moving between his mother's house in the mid-west his father's house in Appalachia. Because of this situation, after elementary school, Brandon never spent more than a year in a row attending the same school. He earned average grades throughout high school, and his academic performance was enough to get him into most of the colleges to which he applied. Brandon began practicing mixed martial arts (MMA) when he was in high school as a way to get in shape and relieve stress. By the time he began taking courses at MSU, he was working out four to five days a week, and competing in amateur MMA bouts.

Because they were both self-employed and wanted Brandon to pursue their respective lines of work, his parents were not willing to provide any financial support to their son so that he could attend college. However, their incomes were too high for him to be awarded any financial aid. Filing on his own was not possible as he needed to remain their dependent for health insurance purposes. However, during his senior year of high school, Brandon applied for and was awarded a grant that allowed him to attend college. The terms of the grant were very specific and included maintaining a 3.0 semester average every semester without exception. Although the grant paid for Brandon's tuition and room and board, he still had to find a way to get money for books, supplies, and incidentals. Immediately after moving onto campus, he began looking for part-time jobs that would pay enough to cover these expenses. After applying for a number of positions, he was offered a job delivering food for Happy Campers, a late-night bar and eatery a few blocks from campus. He was told that he would only need to work one school night per week and could do the rest of his hours over the weekend. The restaurant offered free delivery service until 4am and then the drivers would join the cooks in the kitchen to help with final cleanup. Because of this, Brandon usually didn't get home from work until about 6am.

THE SITUATION

Brandon chose to take Rachel's 10:10am MWF S100 class as an elective in the fall of 2010. He knew that it would not count towards his major but had heard during Orientation that the course was an "easy A." During the first week of class, Rachel handed out the syllabus to all of her students. Included were clauses regarding course attendance

and the late assignments policy (see Appendices A). Additionally, the following statement appeared at the end of the syllabus: *The instructor reserves the right to modify this syllabus at any time throughout the semester to better serve the needs of the class. The instructor may assign additional assignments as needed. The decision to remain in this class upon receipt of this syllabus serves as the students' acceptance of this syllabus as a binding contract, meaning they agree with the terms set forth and the expectations of them as members of the class.*

Almost immediately, Brandon began skipping or coming late to S100. Within the first three weeks he had accrued two tardies and two absences. Because of this, Rachel had a brief discussion with him after class one day expressing her concern, and he assured her that he was just having trouble with his alarm clock and would be in class from that point forward. When he was in class, Brandon was an easy-going student who enjoyed participating in small-group work more than speaking in front of the class. He spoke often of his interest in MMA and his job at Happy Campers. However, by the end of September, he had missed another class and been tardy again, bringing his total number of absences to four. Brandon's behavior in class began to change as he spent most of the time with his head down and would no longer answer questions when called upon. Rachel decided to speak to him again after class.

During their conversation, Brandon revealed that he had been working at Happy Campers two to three school nights a week, in addition to his weekend work hours. When he did come to class, it was often without sleeping as he was being asked to stay at work until 7 or even 8 o'clock in the morning to help prep for the next night's shift. He explained his financial situation to Rachel and reiterated how much he needed a part-time job. Understanding that he was in a tough spot, Rachel offered Brandon the opportunity to meet with her and make a "Success Plan" in order to make-up for one of his absences and not have his attendance impact his grade (as noted in the attendance policy was the instructor's option). They agreed to meet for an hour the following week, and Brandon showed up on time and in good spirits.

Throughout the course of the meeting, Brandon revealed many details of his home and academic life to Rachel. He also shared with her how important it was to him to be at MSU, and that he had to maintain a 3.0 every semester to keep his grant. Brandon cried as he shared how devastating it would be to lose the grant, as this would mean he would be unable to continue attending MSU. He discussed learning to balance the life of a student with the life of a worker, as well as the struggles he had trying to make his money last from week to week—all common issues for a first-year college student. Rachel was surprised to see the student who seemed so tough when talking about his interest in MMA break down. They spent the hour creating a "Success Plan" together, including using a GPA calculator to figure out realistically what grades Brandon needed to earn in each class to keep his grant. Rachel also showed him how to look for part-

time jobs on campus that did not require federal work-study eligibility, as well as how to use the Career Center's off-campus job search database so that he could find another job that wouldn't impede so much on his role as a college student.

Brandon left the meeting in a seemingly upbeat mood and vowing to stick to his plan, find a new job, and get moving on the right track by the time fall break ended the next week. However, on the first day back to class after fall break, he came unprepared with the assignment needed to participate in the day's activity and left when he realized he couldn't earn the points for the activity. This resulted in another absence, and although he could have turned in the assignment within the next 48 hours for partial credit, he emailed Rachel saying that he was unable to do so because he had been called into work and needed the money because he had missed a shift the week before due to being sick; he concluded the email by asking for an extension. She obliged, but was beginning to feel taken advantage of.

Brandon then missed two more days the following week during which students were turning in their research papers and giving presentations on their findings. Rachel emailed Brandon to check in on him and he responded with a brief email stating, *"I am fine, thank you for worrying about me. I just wasn't prepared to present so I skipped class. I will be there on Friday."*

Rachel was very frustrated at this point, but couldn't ignore the guilty feeling she had in the pit of her stomach when she thought about what would happen if Brandon failed her class. She knew from doing the GPA calculator with him a few weeks before that if he earned an F in her class due to his attendance issues, he would most likely lose his grant and be unable to return to MSU in the spring. She also began questioning herself: Could she have done something more to help Brandon understand the ramifications of his not attending class? Was it unethical to give this student so many extra opportunities to be successful just because she knew about his extremely difficult personal and financial situations, and because she understood the challenges that many first-generation college students face?

On Friday, Brandon came to class and sat patiently while the remaining students did their presentations. He was the last student scheduled to present that day, and it was the final day scheduled for presentations. Brandon announced that his presentation would be on the movement to legalize marijuana, and some of his classmates giggled. Then he reached into his bag, turned to Rachel, and said, "Oops, I brought the wrong bag. I thought this had my notes and visual aid, but it just has my lab goggles and Chemistry notebook."

"Could you please just share some kind of information from your research with us so you can get partial credit?" Rachel asked through gritted teeth.

“No, I don’t think I can do that,” Brandon replied.

“Nothing?” she questioned. “Just share something, any little bit of information you learned about, anything new you hadn’t considered before.”

“Yeah, I’ve got nothing. I can’t remember anything,” he said.

Rachel tried not to seem flustered as she redirected the class, went over the homework, and dismissed the other students. As she walked toward Brandon, he ran out of the classroom and didn’t turn around when she called his name. Angry, she stormed back to her office across campus and sat down to see what emails she had received while teaching. The first one was from Brandon, sent less than ten minutes after class had ended.

Hey Rachel sorry I couldn’t give my presentation today but like I said I brought the wrong bag. I was out of it after work. Just wanted to see if I could give it Monday because I think it would be pretty funny. Brandon

All of a sudden, Rachel was exhausted. She held her head in her hands and thought “What do I do now?”

APPENDIX A

From Rachel’s S100 Syllabus

Attendance

Class attendance is one of the best predictors of student success; therefore it is encouraged and expected. The University’s attendance policy allows no more than 10% class absences (including excused and unexcused) for one course. This is a three-hour course; therefore, **no student may miss more than three classes**. Additionally, arriving late to class and/or leaving class early is disruptive and demonstrates a lack of respect, and will not be tolerated. **Tardiness to class three or more times will result in an absence**. Excessive tardiness may result in further negative consequences as determined by the instructors. The “10 percent rule” stated above applies to both excused and unexcused absences.

Due to the importance of involvement and attendance, this class participates in the Creating Academic Responsibility (CAR) Initiative through the Student Success Center. This means after two absences you will be contacted by your instructor or graduate leader to review the importance of attendance as well as discuss outcomes of future absences. More than three absences will result in your referral to the CAR Initiative through which you will be contacted by a Responder from the CAR team to discuss the importance of attendance and academics, as well as other resources available on campus.

Furthermore, four absences and every absence after will result in your final grade drop-

ping by a letter grade at a minimum. After four absences you will have the opportunity to participate in a “Success Planning” session and your instructor may reconsider the drop in letter grade after this scheduled consultation with her.

Late Assignments Policy

It is the expectation that all work be turned in via **Blackboard using SafeAssign (unless otherwise indicated by the instructor)** by 5pm on the date it is due. However, late work will be accepted up to 48 hours after the due date with an automatic deduction of 10% from the assignment’s final grade. Assignments will not be accepted after 48 hours from the 5pm on the due date.

Failure to turn in an assignment on the due date due to extenuating circumstances as determined by the instructors on a case-by-case basis may result in a lesser penalty. Note: Extenuating circumstances do NOT include computer crashes, power outages, fire drills, or any other non-life-threatening issues. Therefore, do not wait until 4:57pm to turn an assignment in.

Because assignments are posted on Blackboard the day they are given and turned in online rather than in class, absence from class is not an acceptable excuse for failure to turn in your work. Please check both your campus email and Blackboard on a daily basis.