

## **August, 2002 - Maryellen Hamilton, Psychology**

“I studied so hard for the test, but you didn't ask me anything that I studied.”

After having heard this statement from my students I decided that I wanted to create a test question that would allow me to see how much students had actually studied for my exams. If you were to ask any student whom I taught here at Saint Peter's, they would tell you that my exams are thorough. I attempt to incorporate everything we have covered for that section of the course on the exam. At the end of each of my exams I ask one simple 5-point bonus question:

**Name something that you have learned in this class that was not mentioned anywhere on this test. You will only get the 5 points if what you say is correct, and substantial enough to be worth 5 points. For example, your answer needs to be a definition or a list of items-it cannot be simply a single word or phrase. Also, your answer must not have been mentioned anywhere on the test. It cannot even have been used as a choice in the multiple-choice questions or as part of the answer to an essay question.**

When this appears on the first test the students are usually surprised. Many times they appear frustrated as they struggle to look back over questions trying to find something that I have missed. However, my experience has been that by the second test, students are looking forward to the bonus question. They have come in excited saying; “I know something that you definitely won't mention on the test.” They come in PREPARED to defeat me. They have attempted to learn something beyond that which will be tested.

This simple bonus question accomplishes a couple of things. First, it allows the students to show me what they have learned. I have had students who have come to my office and say; “I don't understand how I could have failed your test when I studied for hours.” After looking over their exams I usually find all the essay questions blank. They then usually tell me that they didn't study the topics used for the essay questions. So, this bonus question allows them to show me what they have studied. Unfortunately, often the students have also left this question blank which becomes an added benefit of this type of question, i.e., it allows me to distinguish between those who are telling the truth about their studying from those who are not. However, if they have answered this bonus question, I am usually able to use their answer to gauge their study techniques and hopefully aid them in focusing better for the next exam.

I have also found that this question motivates many students to study differently. Students attempt to learn that unique piece of information that may not be tested. Whereas often times students will skip over sections of the text which are not directly part of the reading, my students tend to read these topics. Many times this material is included to highlight the text reading (e.g., case histories, brief biographies, and real life examples). I often find the answer to my bonus question

comes from these “extra sources.” Reading these extra sources can only add to the student's comprehension of the text reading.

I have found this bonus question to work in many different types of classes, from introductory to upper level courses. Some of the best answers have come from my statistics classes where students are able to demonstrate through this question that they understand the statistical concepts at a level beyond memorizing formulas.