June, 1999 - Allen Zagier, Accountancy

Among the most difficult questions faced by faculty is how to measure a student's achievement level. We all strive to be fair and impartial in evaluating students' performance, but by what mode and in what way are the procedural aspects of this assessment to be carried out effectively?

When I first arrived at SPC in the Fall of 1979, I was assigned the Cost Accounting courses which are considered more mathematically demanding. My testing approach was primarily problem-oriented; the solutions utilized concepts developed during the term and experience gleaned from in-class and homework problems. Many students thought that this type of format was too difficult and overwhelming.

For Auditing classes, I tried the essay-type examination. The questions required students to evaluate various audit cases and describe how they would technically proceed. This was an extremely difficult exam to grade. The coherence, sentence structure and punctuation were nonexistent in the students, responses. I am certainly no English grammarian, but even I could not believe how poor these good students' writing skills were. Most were taking Honors courses. Although the students seemed to like this format, I became so disheartened by the exam, I never gave a completely essay examination again.

For the last several years, my examinations have been about 75% objective (multiple choice and true/false) and 25% mathematical problem/short answer type format.

From time to time, I have poled my classes as to their likes/dislikes with differing examination formats.   Some opt for the objective questions, others the problem/short answer type. Some students advocate in-class oral examinations and, of course, some would choose various combinations of the aforementioned, with individual student options for multiple formats for the same examination. This variety attests to the students' perceptions of their strengths/weaknesses both real and imagined.

In preparing an examination, the faculty member is faced with several decisions: the content decision, the format decision and the grading decision.

The content of an examination could be considered student-neutral. All students have the same access to the required material; all have heard the subject matter discussed in class with student and faculty member questions/ answers. There is help outside the classroom through faculty office hours, CALL Center, departmental learning labs (Accountancy Department has one in operation during the day and evening,) and perhaps peer support.

Our selection of the format may not be student-neutral. Could we be creating an inherent bias in the examination in favor of (or against) some student(s)? The perceived students' strengths and weaknesses may be real. How are we to accommodate these differences? Should we make available to the students a menu of test format options and allow each student the format of his/her choice? We are already doing this for students who come within the Americans With Disabilities Act. Should we open this opportunity (right) for all students. And, if so, how are we to grade across these various options? Even with the same content, could a common standard be established?

In grading, we could make the exam student-neutral by a completely objective format. Examinations of the essay or mathematical format require the faculty member to judge the point value of a student's response. Even if we establish answer point value guidelines before the examination and even with coded exams (Students would identify their paper with a code, assigned by a third party and only after the grading is completed would the faculty member be given the code key.), the uniqueness of some answers may require faculty judgment which potentially might not be uniform in grading across 50-100 blue books. If the student must be judged, should a grade, for a particular course, be the judgment of only one faculty member?

An alternative grading approach might be the use of common examinations, at least in multi-sectioned courses. All students taking a particular course would be subject to a uniform examination standard; students would be better able to gauge their success (or lack thereof) with respect to all other students in the course of that semester/trimester. An academic department offering common exams would obtain greater standardization in grade measurement and control. Faculty teaching the various course sections would be assigned responsibility for preparing and grading different parts with grading guidelines made up by yet another member. This might offer a more realistic and equitable determination of grades. I have found over the years that there are classes not statistically "normally" distributed; if a class curve is used, it may create grade inequities with other same-course sections.

Every advantage cited for common examinations might be countered with a disadvantage. Some degree of autonomy would be removed from the individual faculty member both in grading and course content: teachers would be required to adhere strictly to a common syllabus with little time to make adjustments for "slower" classes or opportunity to pursue other areas with "faster" classes. If we did try to pursue interesting or ancillary subject matter, students would not be motivated to focus since the material covered would "not be on the exam." An additional disadvantage is that more faculty administrative committee time would be required for examination development, grading and post mortems.

Other procedural questions arise regarding the degree to which common exams would be integrated into students' grades. Should the common exam be required

for the course or optional with the faculty member? Should the course grade structure be specified by the committee of faculty teaching the course or left to the discretion of the instructor? How should make-up examinations be handled?

These questions and those raised earlier in this discussion do not permit simple answers. The subject of test development and grading is a complex and broad area, dependent, at times, on the specific academic discipline addressed. With the arrival of on-line tests, it's not expected that this complexity will be diminished. Perhaps consideration should be given to obtaining the services of a testing consultant to work at the department level and/or with individual faculty members in designing effective and efficient examinations. Do we have this expertise already on campus? At the very least, a faculty workshop on this topic might be an invaluable aid.