Letters

More on Late Homework

I would like to respond and contribute to the February/March 2009 Teaching Time Savers article by Amy Myers. Myers' "List of Grievances and Special Requests" sounds intriguing despite me having a concern over the fairness implications of having students grading their own homework papers. I also wondered if having students grade their own late papers truly saves time, as one might expect that the professor should look over the student-graded papers anyway. Nonetheless, an interesting idea!

Here is my method for accommodating late homework: I allot each of my students two "Late Homework Freebies" for a course. They each get two times during the semester where they can turn in an assignment late, for any reason whatsoever and I will accept it and grade it with no penalty. Past that, any late homework receives no credit. My reasoning for this is that more than two late homeworks constitutes a pattern that should have consequences. I do give a fluffy late homework deadline of "within a few days of the due date" and that has been effective in preventing homework from Chapter 1 showing up the day of the final exam! I also tell my students I truly do not need to know the reason for the lateness unless they feel compelled to share it. Overall, this policy has worked quite well and I would certainly recommend it to others struggling with this issue of late homework.

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Attacking the Problem, Not the Symptoms

For some years, now, the symptoms have been evident — more and more kids have arrived at their freshman year in college armed with one or more high school credits in "Calculus," have floundered in their first college math course and have vowed never to take math again. There have been sessions at recent conferences (David Bressoud's excellent presentation at the "Math is More" conference last Fall and several at the Joint Meeting in January, among others) that have documented this with charts and graphs and have given rise to despair and a lot discussion about what to do — but not a lot of realistic thinking about why this is happening.

Instead, many university departments are reacting to the symptom by rethinking their lower-level calculus courses, deferring some of calculus's big ideas (like limits) and offering a greatly increased support system. To accompany texts with titles like "Calculus with Early Transcendentals," publishers are now offering texts with titles like "Calculus with Precalculus." There are efforts afoot to offer high school teachers better grounding in calculus, to offer more high school students opportunities to take their classes at a college and to encourage college professors to teach in a high school course. All of this activity is admirable but I suggest that it misses the point — that it is addressing the symptoms, not the problem.

I suggest that many of the kids who have made it though a high school calculus course, have done so at the expense of a solid algebra background and their difficulties aren't so much with calculus as they are with algebra. This is happening because increasing numbers of kids are being pushed into the study of algebra while they are still concrete thinkers and are pushing symbols around cluelessly because they're not ready to think abstractly.

These are not stupid kids, they're just appropriately young kids who, a year or two later, would find that algebra actually can be understood, not just "done." These kids are being rushed through an algebra program as fast as possible without being given the time to explore interesting ideas (Dan Teague talked about this at his "Math is More" session) so that they can get to calculus in high school. What has come out at the end of high school too often recently, is a kid with only the most tenuous grasp of algebra and who hasn't had much fun taking math but who is sporting the trophy of a credit in calculus.

There certainly are kids — I suspect 15% or 20% of the kids I've taught over many years — for whom early and accelerated algebra is exciting and accessible and for whom high school calculus is a wonderful adventure. These are the kids who have always thrived mathematically when they hit college. It's the kids who make up the high school calculus surge that I'm concerned about and many of them become the mathematically walking wounded.

So the question becomes, why this rush to calculus? I suggest that the answer is that university admissions people use calculus as an easy flag — that kids and their families are told that "we" (the university) "like to

see calculus on the transcript" — or something like this. The fact that rushing to calculus may not be pedagogically healthy for most kids plays second fiddle to the exigencies of making the admissions process easier. Such a message is irresistible to parents and to school administrators but the "we" in this message isn't the math faculty. It's the admissions staff. As chair of a high school math department, for years I struggled with parents who wanted their children to accelerate inappropriately so that they could "get to calculus" so that they could "get into a good college."

I've never taught at the university level, so I'm not up on university politics. But I strongly believe that if University Math faculties really want to address the problem of underprepared and discouraged students, they need to start a discussion with their admissions staff. They need to bring in the kind of data that David Bressoud has collected. They need to convince their admissions colleagues that rushing to calculus can be destructive and that a much better "flag" would be a strong algebra background. Such a message to parents and administrators might begin bring back some common sense to the business of preparing kids to be strong, enthusiastic calculus students.

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Correction

In our story on Sylvia Bozeman's award (MAA FOCUS, April/May 2009, page 3), we wrote "Since Bozeman became chair of the mathematics department at Spelman, some twenty students have completed their PhDs there." The sentence should have read "Since Bozeman became chair of the mathematics department at Spelman, some twenty students who graduated from Spelman have completed PhDs in mathematics or mathematics education." Spelman College does not offer doctoral degrees. We regret the error.

Small Increase in 2010 Dues Announced

The MAA Board of Governors approved a modest increase in member dues in January at the Joint Mathematics Meetings. The increase of approximately 2.5% will take effect in 2010 for most members, though for some academic-year based members, it will be implemented starting in September 2009.

It should be noted that there will be no dues increase for undergraduate student members. In addition, this increase does not apply to members who recently joined the MAA, since they receive introductory rate pricing during their first few years of membership.

SIGMAA dues will also be increasing by $2 each. Members who add SIGMAA memberships will pay $12 in the future.

MAA dues were last increased in the 2008 membership year. No increases were made in 2009.