

An Open Letter to the Faculty at Nassau Community College Dated
By Professor of Mathematics Phillip Cheifitz
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Dear Colleagues,

I have been teaching in the mathematics department at Nassau Community College for 38 years. It appears to me that over the past several years, issues regarding student responsibilities have cropped up that seem to be common across all mathematics courses, and I dare say, throughout the College. Among these issues are:

- * Students truly believe, and indeed expect, that if they come to class, they will receive a passing grade and, more likely than not, the grade will be a C or better.
- * Students believe that coming to class is their sum responsibility as students.
- * The vast majority of students do no homework, ever.
- * Students have come to expect long review sessions before an exam, and that the exam will contain only the problems covered in the review, with altered constants.

In large measure, these behaviors have been reinforced throughout students' high school careers due to parental pressures on teachers, social promotions, and an educational system that mandates that "no child should be left behind," rather than "Each child to his or her maximum potential." With the expectation that all high school students pass certain statewide mathematics tests to graduate, standards have been so lowered that on the most recent math 9 Regents exam, answering 44% of the questions correctly resulted in a passing grade. What kind of message is sent when not knowing 56% of the material is acceptable? If a foreign government foisted this sort of mediocrity upon us, we would consider it an act of war.

The problem is not confined to high schools. It is systemic. I have heard students remark: "Everyone gets an A in Prof. X's course," "Don't worry if it's not handed in on time," "I copied it from the internet,"

Prof. Y is easier than Prof. Z because we can use cheat sheets" and "Prof. W never fails anyone." Surely, we all feel that there are a basic set of skills and behaviors that we want all our students to have when they leave a particular course. However, faced with the student attitudes and behaviors cited above, many of our faculty members have become frustrated, have begun to lower expectations even further, and continue to assign grades that are not indicators of what their students truly know. Some faculty members have even stopped teaching. Perhaps if students took more responsibility for their education, there would be significantly fewer remedial courses. Furthermore, this explosion of poorly prepared students has created a belief among some faculty that because of pitiful student performance, the College does not need new faculty members that are highly qualified, i.e., great teachers who hold terminal degrees, are published, or have received local, statewide or national recognition. Rather, they believe that NCC needs a myriad of new faculty whose sum qualification is that they are "remediation specialists," whatever

that means. I don't recall who gave NCC the responsibility for being the new 4th grade (o.k., maybe the new 8th grade) and I surely don't recall accepting that responsibility. But please don't misunderstand me. I support the notion that students with deficiencies should receive all the help they need when they enter the College. However, let's be sure that when students exit any class, they have learned the requisite material. I constantly encounter students who cannot read for meaning, cannot write a coherent paragraph and are innumerate. I, for one, don't want to teach elementary algebra in a calculus class.

The results of student weaknesses in English, reading, and surely in mathematics, just to name a few areas, manifest themselves in:

- * the inability to perform at a college level in many of their other courses,
- * the lack of any assumed responsibility in the classroom and in their personal lives,
- * a lack of pride,
- * a general attitude of "it's not my job,"
- * the loss of jobs to outsourcing, and
- * a weakening of society in general.

Nassau Community College provides an opportunity for higher education that, for many students, would not normally be available to them. But, in my opinion, the opportunity is not a degree entitlement. The opportunity carries with it an associated responsibility for our students and it is a responsibility they must learn to accept. It seems to me that spoon-feeding students only teaches them the shape of the spoon. To help our students succeed in college, as well as in life, we should prepare for each class, try to teach the material in the clearest possible way, and construct test questions that accurately reflect the curriculum we teach. However, the road to academic success must be a two-way street. We should encourage our students to rise to the challenge and assist them in every way possible. But, we should expect and demand that students do their part. Personally, I will expect students to do homework, I will hold to standards on examinations, I will not award inflated grades, and I will not assign "extra credit" projects to replace poor results on exams. It is incumbent on the faculty of Nassau Community College to be part of the cure rather than part of this insidious disease.

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