Course Concepts

Introduction
The purpose of this document is to provide you with some additional information related to taking any course from me. The information contained in here is not related to the course material; rather, it is related to conduct and how to maximize what you get/take from the course.

This document is a work in progress, sometimes a student will inspire me to provide an update...

Personal Responsibility
If I communicate anything, I want to emphasize that we each need to take personal responsibility for the decisions we make in our lives. You each have varied reasons and motivations for attending college and why you are taking this course. You each have different situations in your lives that affect time and ability to study and prepare for the course. Those situations are the result of the decisions you've made in your life. Some of these factors are married status, children status, job status, language and others. I ask that you accept responsibility for the decisions you've made in your life and not use these as excuses for your lack of performance and why I should provide you some benefit not available to everyone else in the class. To the best of my ability, I strive to offer the same opportunity to each student in my classes, no favoritism is allowed for any reason.

For example, a student I had a couple years ago was getting married during the semester. He came to me, told me the situation and asked what he needed to do beforehand; I was very happy to help him. This is an excellent example of what to do. He knew it was his choice to get married during school, rather than asking me to bend the rules for him to let him turn work in late, he asked what homework was going to be due at that time and he got it done in advance. This is what I expect of everyone.

An example from my life. I had a health problem while I was in school. I had the option of taking a medical leave from school, but I didn't. Instead, I stayed in school. Because of the health issue, it did affect my school performance and I didn't earn the grade I wanted. My point is, I had a choice and I knew that my choice could potentially affect my grade negatively. It did, but I accepted the grade without complaint (to the instructor, in my mind I was grumbling a bit, but it wasn't the instructor's fault).

Mistakes
Somewhat related to the above, but a slightly different flavor: We all make mistakes, even instructors!! I speak to grading more specifically later in this document, but I want to note something about mistakes...Do not immediately freak out and get mad if I or the grader makes a mistake in grading; I offer a solemn guarantee that at least one grading mistake will be made every semester. Your first response should be, "no problem, this is a mistake and it'll get worked out." It is just a mistake, not a personal attack against you,
so don't take it as anything other than a mistake that will get corrected in due course.

I know it seems strange to even make mention of this, but I am continually surprised at how upset students get over simple mistakes. When they do come to me and I correct them without argument, they seem speechless and unprepared. They've shown up in my office about to explode, ready to argue at a moments notice. I do my best to disarm them and explain that it is just a mistake and its okay to approach me about such things. Give me the benefit of doubt, at least wait to get mad at me until after I don't change your grade for something you think is a mistake, but I don't ☺

**Email Communication**

I am very good in responding via email. I'm in front of a computer most of the day and try to be good at quickly responding to email. One of my bad work habits is that I let email interrupt what I'm doing, this makes me good at email, but is probably not the best working habit. However, I am getting better about setting aside specific times during the day to respond to class emails. Surprisingly, I'm better at responding to email during the evening than I am during the day, I'm especially good on the weekends.

Using email as a means of communication for course help is effective. Email forces you to think through the problem as you explain to me what you've done and why you need help. Some things to think about when sending me an email asking for help:

- Consider visiting the tutor labs first, there is no substitute for in-person help.
- Consider visiting me during my office hours.
- Explain to me what the problem is and what solutions you have tried and what it is that you don't understand. If you haven't tried to solve the problem, or can't explain to me how you have tried to solve the problem, it's not good.
- Ensure you don't send me an email telling me your program doesn't work and then ask me to find the problem.
- PLEASE do not 133t speak!! The next person who sends me an email calling me “u”, I'm going to, well, it won't be pretty! I honestly despise this kind of writing in regular emails, it shows a serious lack of respect. I won't use l33t speek when writing to you and I expect the same in return. Use the word "you", not "u"; use the word "your", not "ur" and so on. It doesn't have to be perfect grammar, but at least try to use english (its the only language I'm any good at). If you are an international student, broken english is just fine and acceptable.
- As noted above, when you send me an email, or for that matter, come to my office, tell me what the problem is, what you've tried and where your understanding is lacking. I am more than happy to help out, but I'm not a very good mind reader and it makes the best use of both of our time if I have a clear explanation.

**Cheating & Getting Help**

Cheating is not tolerable in any form or for any reason! I can not emphasize strongly enough how much I despise cheating.
If you cheat on an assignment, at a minimum, you will receive negative the number of points possible for the assignment, a letter will be placed in your department file and a letter will be sent to your college dean; I hold the option to assign an F for the course, on a first offense. A second offense will guarantee receiving an F for the course. If you cheat on a test, you will receive an F for the course, in addition to the two letters mentioned above.

Two reasons come to the front of my mind for reasons why people cheat: Laziness and Desperation. I’d like to offer some brief thoughts on these reasons and some ideas I have to combat them.

Laziness is too broad of a subject to tackle, but I think the solution is self-evident.

Desperation, on the other hand, is trickier and I think there is something I can do to help out with this. Desperation arises from a variety of situations: relationships gone bad, job gone bad, family gone bad, external (parents) or internal pressure to do well, not understanding something and the frustration resulting from that and so on down the line. When any of these, and other, situations arise, it affects your time and/or ability to concentrate and then as the deadline looms, desperation rears its ugly head and the temptation to cheat begins to seem like a good solution.

When life's problems begin to affect you, don't let your desperation turn to cheating! If your world is crushing in around you, please come talk to me first and let's see if we can find an appropriate solution. I don't promise that your grade won't be affected by what is happening in your life, but I do promise to help if I can. I can't give you an unfair advantage versus other students who are turning their work in on time, but I'm open to possibilities.

**What is a general definition of cheating?** The work you submit must represent an independent solution, one that you could reproduce on your own if so requested. Submitting work based in any way on the work of others is considered cheating. You may not copy the work, with or without, the knowledge of another person and turn it in as your own. In some classes, however, we encourage or require the use of Pair Programming or Team projects, obviously, an independent solution is not possible.

**I'm scared, can I talk to anyone, what is allowed?** The following are some general principles to consider as a framework for appropriate behavior in this course:

- You should feel free to discuss the requirements for an assignment.
- You should feel free to discuss techniques and technical approaches to solving a problem. You should **not** provide code examples from your assignment to another student.
- You should first make a legitimate effort to solve the problem on your own. Too many students get into the habit of going straight to me for help, even before trying to understand the problem on their own.
- In order, I suggest the following steps if you need help: Request help from the CS lab tutors, ask fellow students for suggestions and finally come to me. I am generally available via email throughout the day and certainly you should come by my office during office hours or anytime you see the door open (if my door is closed, please respect this as my preparation time).
• Anytime you are given code to use as part of the assignment, please acknowledge that code and the source in a comment section. Typically assignments will build upon each other. You should never use another student's code as the basis for a follow-on assignment. Follow-on assignments should be based upon your code or code that I provide, if I provide a basis solution.

Grading

In general the concept I want to communicate is that grades are not something you negotiate, neither are they something that I, as an instructor, give. Instead, grades are something each student earns. In my view, at the start of the semester, there are no scores, you are neither flunking nor getting a perfect score from which you rise or fall. It is by your performance on each assignment and test that you earn a final grade for the semester.

If you ever see a mistake in grading on an assignment or a test, please, please feel comfortable and free to talk to me about it. I'm always happy to fix any mistakes! I repeat, don't be afraid to approach me about a mistake made in grading.

On the other hand, be careful about continually bugging me at every turn throughout the semester for 1 or 2 point issues. As noted above, scores are not something you negotiate (with me, anyway). My judgment is final and is not up for negotiation. If I've taken 7 points off for something and you think it should be 5, save us both time and don't bother me about it, your grade isn't going to change. Additionally, when you come to me about grading issues, you might be opening a Pandora's box you don't really want to see opened: If I think you are trying to negotiate, i.e. not just fixing a mistake, the entire assignment/test is reopened for grading. Meaning, if I find there are other mistakes that would negatively affect your score, I am now free to also fix those mistakes. You are warned.

When the semester is complete and your grade is not what you had hoped for, it is not my fault!! Remember the discussion above about personal responsibility, the choices you've made in your life are what have culminated in your final grade. Don't come to me telling me that you "need" a certain grade to keep a scholarship, tuition waiver, sponsorship or anything of the like, those are your responsibility, not mine. It is unfair, not to mention, absolutely unethical for me to change anyone's grade for any reason other than performance on assignments and tests and I won't do it, so don't bother asking me. The grade you earn is based solely upon your performance, I cannot use any other factors.

Let's discuss final grades and grade curving: The easiest grades for me to assign are A's and F's. In both cases, it is always clear those grades have been earned. On the other hand, some of the most difficult grades are the borderline - and + grades. In each class, someone earns the lowest A, the highest A- or the lowest B- and the highest C+. Just because you are the highest C+, are only .6% away from a B- and "it won't hurt anybody", you will still receive a C+ for the course; this is, in general, what you should plan on. In the case that the class as a whole hasn't performed well due to content difficulty (and not general laziness), I will do a so-called curve. This means, that there is no hard and fast rule for what percentage of students should gets A's, B's or whatever, it comes down to my judgment...and my judgment is final and not open for negotiation.
Don't take the above to mean that I'm some sort of cold hearted person, the opposite is true. When I'm grading a test or assignment, I grade in such a way as to interpret any answer to be most favorable to the student, honestly! It is not my goal when grading to "find points to take off", instead, I'm looking for understanding. If the understanding is there, but a few minor mistakes were made, most of the points will be awarded. I'd be thrilled if everyone got an A in my courses.

To further expand on the above discussion: A couple of years ago I had a student doing borderline A-/B+ work. Unfortunately, the student bombed the final, they later told me they hadn't studied and it was their fault. In the end, the student received a C+ for the final grade. I was so troubled by this, knowing they were fully capable of getting an A, that I contacted Dr. Cooley and asked if there was anything I could do. He certainly sympathized but told me that it is imperative that I assign grades based solely upon class performance, it is the ethical and legal thing to do. It really and truly breaks my heart to see something like this happen, but I'm compelled, by my conscience first and foremost, but also by ethical and legal considerations.

Another, brighter, example I had was another student who had told me that he expected to do B or B+ work in my class, that was just what he usually gets. Throughout the course that held true, although towards the end, he picked it up and started doing better. As I put together the final grades, he did well enough on the final, by a single point, that he earned an A-. I was thrilled, I had no problem seeing him receive an A-, even if it was by the barest of margins, it was the grade he had earned! I never had a chance to speak to him about it, but I hope he was as thrilled about it as me.

Please, please don't ever tell me that you need a grade for this that or other reason that have nothing to do with how you've performed in the class. I've received ugly and hurtful emails from students who blow up at me because I am somehow responsible for them loosing a scholarship or having to leave school. In fact, I've had students lie to me, telling me that Dr. Cooley or someone else told them that if I would change their grade it would be okay; don't make me a fool, I follow up with the other professors on these comments. Let's be honest, if you were already that close to loosing a scholarship or being removed from school, the grade you earned in the one class you took from me, had very little to do with the problem. The problem is a systemic problem in your life that needs to be solved, your poor performance in my class was merely a symptom of a greater issue. Be mature enough to accept responsibility for the greater problem and don't project it onto me.

Closing Thoughts

Thought it would be good to close this document in a nice note. Most of what is written in here is the result of bad experiences I've had with students and sounds pretty ominous. Let me be clear about something: I enjoy teaching, the reasons are varied, but it is simple enough to know that I enjoy it; I enjoy the interaction with the students and it all brings great satisfaction to me. The reason you see me standing in front of the class is because I want to be there and I want to help each and every person learn the material and even beyond that, learn the greater lessons there are to be had within the university setting.

I consider myself a very shy person, so it is a tension in my life to stand in front of a
group of people several times a day and talk. I mention this because I can sometimes appear to be unapproachable, but it is only because I'm shy, not because I mean to put anyone off. You should always feel comfortable saying hi to me around campus and certainly should feel free to stop by my office for help during my office hours. Teaching is a choice for me and because of that, I intend to maximize your class experience as best I can.

I look forward to our time together this semester.