

## CHAPTER

# 18



## Finals and Farewells

### **Final Exam (Monday)**

The exam begins at 8:30 and everyone is there. I've fielded about twenty-five e-mails over the last two or three days, some from students trying to work out exactly what's on the exam and some asking me to remind them about who did what at Inchon, Anzio, and so on. They get right to work on the exam after I've given them a brief reminder about the honor code and the need to apportion their time wisely. As usual, several have forgotten to bring blue books and are panicky about whether they can use loose sheets ("Yes, but make sure your name's on every one"). Others haven't got a pen or pencil. Others again, however, have brought in twenty or thirty new pens, ready for every contingency, and can be persuaded to lend to their less provident fellows. I wait for a few minutes as they read through the exam to make sure everything is clear, then leave the room (in accordance with the honor code, which specifies that professors should not be in the room during exams) and

go back to my office. Those who finish early, which should be most of them, are free to leave as soon as they are done.

After about two hours one of the women comes to find me and complains bitterly. She says the exam is all nit-picking detail and that although she has learned everything in this course, the exam hasn't given her the opportunity to demonstrate her learning or her analytical skills. "No, no," I answer, "there's nothing nit-picking about it. Every question is based squarely on important issues, events, and personalities that we addressed in the course—things every course member should know. You can't write a conceptually convincing paper if you don't even know the factual basics, and this exam is easy because it requires *only* the basics, except in its first and last sections." She knows, and I know, that exams of this kind leave students with nowhere to hide if they don't know the facts. I'm willing to give them half a point if they're close on the dates, but with the states, the individuals, and the map question, they've simply got to know what's what and who's who. It's pretty clear from her presence here and her anguish that she doesn't know. I tell her, "Well, let's wait and see how you got on. I haven't seen your exam yet so I can't judge how well you did. By Friday I will have graded it so check back with me then." She then repeats that I have been unfair and says that she's afraid her grade, which would have been an A- or B+, will now be a C. That's a common stunt, too—telling the teacher that you were "going into the exam with an A for the course"—and it's usually delusory.

When I get back to the classroom at 10:50 there are only four or five students left, and they keep going to the bitter end. Regina, as arranged, comes in as the last one leaves and I show her the exam for the first time. She says, "I talked to a group of the women last night and they were freaking out." "Why?" "Because having to know the facts puts them so much on the spot." We go over the map questions together and I give her a master copy with answers because she says she would otherwise get most of it wrong! We'll grade them tonight and tomorrow, then meet on Wednesday morning to figure out final grades.

### **Exam Grading (Tuesday)**

The grading marathon is not so arduous as usual, partly because I have a TA and partly because much of the exam is mechanical. There is a

wide spectrum of grades among them, as I expected. Some students have obviously prepared carefully, systematically learning all the main points including the names, dates, places, and issues. Others have a good grasp of some issues and only a tenuous hold on others, and some are hopelessly confused all the way through. Hardly anyone gets more than half the questions on the map right, and only one out of thirty-nine can trace the course of the Missouri River even approximately.

On the initial twenty-five questions most students do well, though a few of the identifications are obviously too hard. Only two out of the thirty-nine can remember Mario Savio, even though I showed a sequence of slides of him standing on the Berkeley police car roof during the big Sproul Plaza free speech demonstration in 1964 and read a few passages from one of his speeches. One thinks Savio was a McCarthyite in the 1950s. Another writes that "Mario Savio, in response to the first major oil crisis, became very weary of shortages in general, feeling that eventually there would be nothing left." A third says, "Mario Savio was a political machine that helped the impoverished immigrants in exchange for votes and political support." In yet another student's view, "Mario Savio was an Italian man who may have killed Robert Kennedy."

They have trouble with economist John Kenneth Galbraith too, around whose *Affluent Society* I based a lecture on postwar prosperity. Here is some of the unconventional wisdom about Galbraith's historical significance (with, in brackets, my guess about who they were really talking about):

John Kenneth Galbraith was a major student leader during the civil rights movement in 1960s, specifically the Free Speech Movement on Berkeley's campus. [Mario Savio!!!]

John Kenneth Galbraith tried to kill Henry Clay Frick. [Alexander Berkman]

John Kenneth Galbraith is an economist who argued that raising oil prices is good for the economy. [????]

John Kenneth Galbraith made paintings of Yosemite National Park and sent them back east. He was a product of manifest destiny—the idea that white Europeans were to spread Christianity and the word of God to the west. [Albert Bierstadt?]

John Kenneth Galbraith ran for president against Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 election and lost. [Wendell Willkie.]

John Kenneth Galbraith studied labor and work and connected psychologi-

cal and sociological aspects of work and productivity. [Understandable: this one has confused him with Frank Gilbreth, the efficiency expert who wrote *Cheaper by the Dozen*.]

John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the “germ theory.” In it, whites are the dominant race and should not interbreed with anyone of “lesser caliber” for fear of diminishing the white race. [A nifty mix of Herbert Baxter Adams and Madison Grant.]

John Kenneth Galbraith was a scientist during the Cold War era who helped construct a bigger nuclear bomb. [Edward Teller.]

D-Day got a few nice variations too. I like the one that makes the Allied Expeditionary Force sound like a really ardent group of holiday makers, who are just determined to have their own way on the beach: “D-Day was the day American troops crossed the English Channel and took the French beach with a decisive but bloody victory.” “D-Day was in 1944 when we entered World War II through the weak under belly of Europe to fight the Germans.” For pure muddle, you can’t do much better than this one: “D-Day was when Germany invaded France at the shores of Normandy, and another reason for the US joining the Second World War.” There’s a lovely, understandable slip in this description of Albert Pope (actually a pioneer bicycle manufacturer): “He was the first Catholic presidential candidate.”

By the end of the day, pestering e-mails are flowing in from students wanting to know their grades, but for the moment I put them off.

## Winding Up

Regina and I meet, compare grades, and then fill out the grade sheet. I assign grades for class participation, based on notes I’ve taken throughout the semester and her remarks, and then work out from all the components (papers, midterm, final, participation) what the final grades will be. The act of writing down some of these grades is physically painful because I know, the instant the pen makes the mark, that it is the prelude to a long and ugly argument. Luckily I’m going abroad next Tuesday, but I’ll be blessed indeed if I can escape three or four angry confrontations before then. Some will be with students who got an A- and who will tell me that I’ve ruined their hitherto perfect GPAs of 4.00. Others will be with students who got a C+ and would really much

rather have a B+. Surly Bs, the most common grade, will be campaigning for an A-. Lots of students these days regard the grade you give them as a bargaining point. Just as used-car dealers set the initial price too high, knowing the customer will haggle them down, so (the students think) the professor sets the initial grade too low, expecting the student will haggle them up. None of them will welcome the truth that I've really been generous in grading and that they might easily have scored lower.

On the final, they got an initial grade out of 187. To each score I have added 13 points, then divided the resulting score by two to give a percentage. In view of the fact that most of these percentages are in the sixties and low to mid-seventies I have decided to let an A be anything above 80. I then descend in five-point increments, to let 75-79 be A-, 70-74 be B+, and so on. If I had made 85 or 90 the A point, everyone's grade would be worse. What do you think, reader? Here is the spread of the thirty-nine final grades

A	4
A-	7
B+	7
B	12
B-	4
C+	2
C	1
C-	1
F	1

It's not exactly the work of a ruthless hanging judge, is it? In theory, A is supposed to mean outstanding, B good, C average, and D poor. A fair number of these people were poor, but ask them if *they* think they were poor. I've clearly made B mean average, rather than C (the old "gentleman's C" is now the "preprofessional's B," attainable by the ordinary, moderately idle frat boy). Incidentally, to further soften the blow on the lower end of this grade chart, several of the lower grades went to people who are actually taking the course S/U. In other words, their letter grade won't show up on the final grade roll, which will simply report that their performance was satisfactory.

I give Becky, our administrator, the grade sheet—she'll check it and

pass it along to the registrar—and in return she gives me the evaluations that the students wrote during the last week of classes. They are a pleasure to read on the whole, with lots of praise for the lectures, music, slides, and films, but there are a few brickbats too. Many students say how glad they were not to have a textbook, in view of texts' dreadful dullness and high cost, but a few say they would have liked one, to help them prepare for the final (never mind that the library—which they seem to regard as mysteriously inaccessible—is bursting with them). Here are a few of the harsher comments on me and on the readings:

Every week we had to read another novel and although some of the reading was tedious and soporific, I found many books to be quite interesting [for "novel" read "book"].

Some of the books were so boring and factual that they were very hard to read. I guess everything can't be fun to read, though . . . Professor Allitt just talks so fast that it's hard to keep up with him. It is also hard to know what is not important.

Books assigned for reading should be changed. I think historical fiction, for example Margaret George's novels, would be something you would remember after the course ends, rather than *Divided Highways*.

Drop the California river book in the river!

Reconsider which books we read for the course. Some of them (like the California river book) seemed useless and I felt so bored reading it that I couldn't even pay attention.

I glow with pride on reading this next one, which you must pardon me for quoting at length:

It's always wonderful to have a professor as energetically interested in the subject matter as Professor Allitt. In addition to being masterfully well-prepared and inventive, he's also a captivating orator, capable of keeping my interest high even on the driest of topics during the course. The mix of media only complements his wonderful teaching style, together making the class one of my most educational and enjoyable ones.

I'll draw a veil over what this otherwise excellent person had to say about the California river book. Poor old Carey McWilliams—I still

think he's a good writer, but I doubt whether he'll see the light of day in my courses ever again. I had it in mind to assign his *Factories in the Fields* next time but I'd better not. Maybe a romance by Margaret George instead.

## Conclusion

That's the whole story. Next Monday is graduation day. Next Tuesday I'm off to Germany for three weeks, then back in America for the month of June before returning to Europe for six more weeks as a teacher in our British Studies Program at Oxford. As always, I feel sad to have reached the end of the semester, sad to think that this wonderful class, with all its quirks, delights, and oddities, will never meet again.

As I predicted, the students became far more attractive with the passage of time, far more varied, and far more obvious in their vulnerability. Some learned a lot, some picked up a handful of ideas and insights, a few improved their writing, and nearly all learned (more or less willingly) a cluster of facts. As my quotations from papers and exams demonstrate, however, not all the students were able to banish misunderstanding; a few remained, apparently, in outer darkness throughout. The Catholic Church used to use the expression "invincible ignorance" to describe someone who had never heard about Christianity and therefore could not be criticized for not being a Christian. Professors everywhere can find another use for this delicious phrase.

I hope, however, that I haven't given the impression that the students were dim or hopeless. In the nature of things you have to spend more time dealing with the problem cases than with the successes, and even the problem cases are often doing excellent work in other courses, whatever their blind spot for history. Besides, it's no fun quoting the good ones' papers; they're just accurate and matter-of-fact; hardly any rise to actual literary merit. And there are so few opportunities to meet and talk with the good ones, because they're just steadily doing everything right and feeling content with the way things are going. Most will just fade into the background, to be seen occasionally on campus, names forgotten until they ask me, two or three years from now, for letters of recommendation.

The end-of-term feeling of nostalgia is intensified by the knowledge

that these days are, for a quarter of our students, their last days of college. Already students all over campus, finished with exams and uninvolved with graduation, are loading up cars, hugging friends goodbye, and driving away. Three thousand chairs have been laid out on the quadrangle, all facing the VIP graduation stand, and the feeling of imminent ending is in the air. The big motors will crank up again at the end of August, but it doesn't feel that way just now.

It's a great life being a professor: the benefits are major, the irritants minor. It isn't easy keeping a distance from the students, especially in the syrupy emotional atmosphere of graduation week. The temptation to befriend the students, to yield to their pleas for better grades, and to mother them before they go out into the world is so strong that I find myself, almost, forgetting my own first rule, the one embodied in the great decree, "I'm the teacher, you're the student."