Student Faculty Relations Committee

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Summary of discussions

Question

Are there issues of fairness with regard to the limited accessibility of old final exams that are in the possession of undergraduate student organizations, and, if so, how should the faculty address this (perceived) unfairness?

Student Perspective

The student representatives of this committee agreed that those who belong to sororities or fraternities have an unfair advantage because they have access to old exams. However, they pointed out that most of the professors provide old exams for their students for practice. It is unclear whether the test banks at Greek organizations on campus are up to date or not. Even though the student representatives felt that there is an unfairness issue, they were definitely against mandating professors to submit old exams. However, they thought it would be helpful if these tests were available to enrolled students on secure websites (e.g. OAK) on a voluntary basis. Most professors already do this.

Faculty Perspective

It is important to provide students with fair access to old exams but we also need to consider the academic and intellectual property rights of the faculty. This is a complicated issue that extends beyond fair access to exams and touches upon effective approaches to teaching. Although asymmetric access to old tests and examinations may be a problem, faculty should not be required to make old exams or tests available to their students unless they wish to do so. Note that most professors regularly provide practice tests. Below is a list of major points that were discussed.
(1) It seems that a vast majority of professors provide review questions, practice exams, mock tests and old exams to help their students learn and prepare for their exams. It is fair to say that most students at Vanderbilt get more than adequate, if not outstanding support from their teachers to prepare for the final exams.

(2) Many professors change their test/exam questions every year so that there are no identical questions repeated across multiple years. This effort significantly increases the test-producing burden for faculty members in disciplines where students are required to solve problems in exams. It is extremely time-consuming to create problems that will test appropriate skills in the time period allocated to the test.

(3) Exam and test questions are considered intellectual property, just as books and articles are. Test questions are more than mechanical assessment and grading tools. Most faculty members work hard to create novel test questions that are not just clinical probes of students' understanding of the material, but also a springboard to a deeper and richer understanding of the material covered in class.

(4) Underlying assumptions concerning intellectual property rights should be clarified. Students assume that the tests, once taken, belong to them and that they are free to do as they like with them, which includes putting the tests on file in fraternity and sorority houses. However, test questions are the intellectual property of the individuals who created them. The answers that a student has given to these tests are the intellectual property of that student.

(5) In some disciplines, testing is not just a way to find out whether a student has acquired a certain set of knowledge or learned how to solve a particular type of problems, but also a means of determining the progress of the students' ability to apply their knowledge to an unfamiliar problem. If professors are required to make their test questions available in the public domain, the ability to conduct this type of testing will be severely limited. The volume of material taught over the course of a term is finite, and so is the ability to create good questions that truly test the students' understanding of the material and, in doing so, encourage them to work hard to gain that depth of understanding.