Grades on assignments and tests are reliable, yet imperfect, indicators of students’ knowledge and understanding of a subject matter. Overall course grades are also often influenced by students’ complying with class procedures: e.g., if attendance and participation are required, then students who rarely attend class may get poor grades, even if they understand the course content and have done well on the assignments and tests.

A variety of extra credit opportunities are often given as a way to raise grades on assignments and tests and overall course grades. But there are reasons why instructors should not offer extra credit, that doing so is unjustified and unfair. Extra credit is common but is surprisingly controversial.[1]

1. Arguments For Extra Credit

Extra credit opportunities are often said to be justified on the grounds that they:

1. motivate students to participate in research, e.g., being subjects in psychological experiments, and students learn from that participation;
2. get students involved in “the life of the mind” and encourage academic virtues, such as curiosity, creativity, and application;
3. encourage students to attend special events outside of class, e.g., guest lectures and special forums;
4. just help students get the grades that they want or “need.”

These justifications are doubtful.

About (1), if the, e.g., psychological studies that students participate in as subjects are irrelevant to the course, then participation should not influence their grades: that grade should only reflect their understanding of course content. If the research is importantly relevant, then participation should be required, not extra credit. Imagine a class on all aspects of psychology research but where any participation in psychological research was extra credit, not required: that is a poorly-designed course.

About (2), educational research suggests that extra credit opportunities rarely contribute to ordinary students becoming “super-students.” And if the cultivation of academic virtues is a legitimate goal, this can and should be sought with regular assignments. And academic virtues can be promoted by encouraging students to participate in campus intellectual activities even if extra credit is not given: participation without a grade-enhancing reward displays virtue in itself.

About (3), if the content of the special event – lecture, forum – isn’t relevant to the course then, again, participation shouldn’t influence grades. If it is relevant, then any students who attend should benefit from the experience, even without extra credit. But not all students can attend such events since they have other (school, work, family) responsibilities and obligations at that time. So, those who can attend get a special boost to their grade that those who cannot attend cannot get. That is not fair.

Finally, about (4), students don’t need passing grades, if they haven’t earned those grades. Students can fail classes; sometimes that’s for the best. To help students pass, extra support, guidance, and tutoring can be provided; instructors can also try new teaching and course design strategies to address student difficulties. Extra credit isn’t needed to promote genuine student success.

While there may be better arguments for extra credit not discussed here, the case in its favor so far appears weak.

2. Arguments Against Extra Credit

Extra credit opportunities are argued against in a variety of ways.

A. Equal Opportunity Arguments:

Christopher Pynes observes that “every student in a class should have an equal opportunity to earn the same grade as every other student.” Many extra credit opportunities, especially those outside of scheduled class time, e.g., evening forums, hearing speakers at nearby schools, are not equally available.
opportunities. As observed above, not all students can participate since they have legitimate conflicting responsibilities. These forms of extra credit are unfair since some students’ grades shouldn’t increase because of points that not all students have an equal opportunity to receive.

B. “Easy or Hard” Dilemmas and Grade Inflation Arguments:

Extra credit options are typically either easy or hard. If they are hard then only the best students will complete them, and they already have high grades, but students who “need” extra credit, because they are not learning the regular material and thus have poor grades, will not receive those points. Easy extra credit contributes to “grade inflation,” i.e., grades higher than warranted by the students’ understanding: a B-earning student in a very hard class might receive an A because of fluff extra credit. And a student with a D-level of understanding shouldn’t get a B or A by doing a lot of easy extra credit. Extra credit can contribute to grades not accurately reflecting students’ understanding of the course material.

C. Inequality Arguments:

Studies suggest that it’s more often the best students who do extra credit assignments: they already have high grades. Students with poor grades tend to not take advantage of extra credit options. And if students are not doing well with the regular assignments, it is unwise to burden them with even more assignment opportunities. So extra credit tends to make grade-rich students richer and grade-poor students potentially poorer, insofar as it can dilute their focus on the regular work.

D. ‘Risky Proposition’ Arguments:

Extra credit opportunities may give students the sense that they can put less effort into regular assignments because they can “make it up” with extra credit. This strategy is risky. Having no extra credit temptations avoids this risk since students’ attention to the regular work is not divided (at least not by extra credit).

E. Extra Work Arguments:

In classes where a sufficient and responsible amount of work is assigned, extra credit is more work for students and more grading for instructors. If the assignment is important, it should be a required assignment. If not, it can be eliminated without significant loss. If the assignment is fluff and the grading easy, points from it should not contribute to grades that indicate knowledge of non-fluff material.

These arguments seem compelling, but perhaps strong rebuttals could be developed.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, we might ask, “Are any forms of extra credit not subject to an objection from above?” But would this be an acceptable extra credit question, given the arguments above?

Notes

[1] This paper presents many of the arguments from Christopher Pynes’ “Seven Arguments Against Extra Credit.” Pynes’ discussion references Daryl Close’s “Fair Grades.”

References


Pynes, Christopher A. “Seven Arguments Against Extra Credit.” Teaching Philosophy 37, no. 2 (2014): 191-214.

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