Daniel R. Page

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Dr. Orland Hoeber, Department Head
Department of Computer Science
University of Regina
3737 Wascana Parkway
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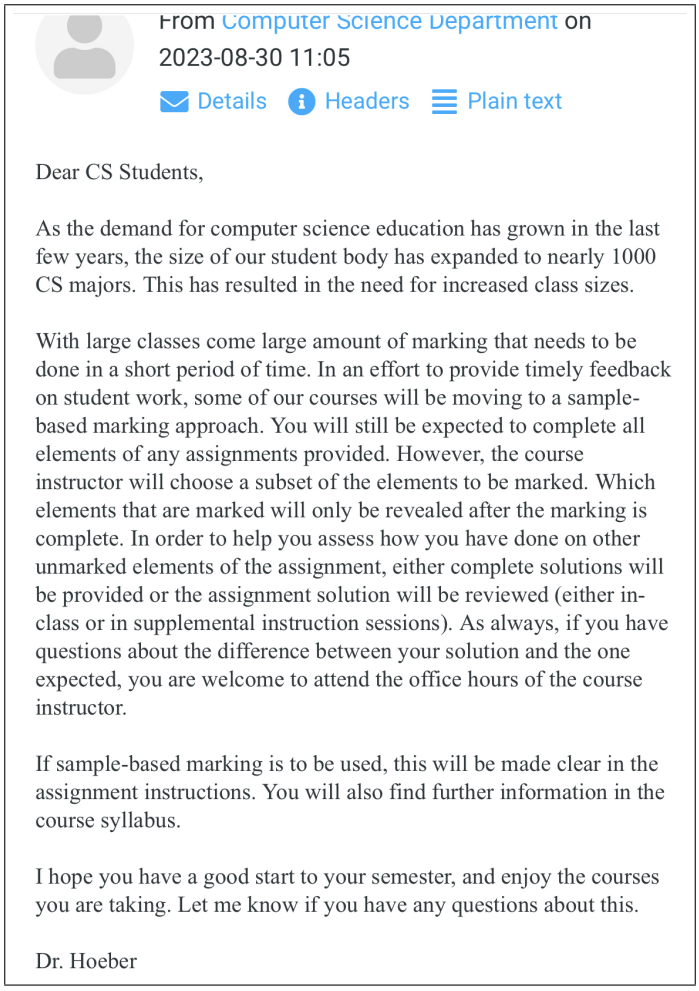
September 2, 2023

Dear Dr. Hoeber,

My name is Dr. Daniel Page, previously we worked together during my time as a faculty member of the Department of Computer Science at The University of Regina (2021-2022). My letter is in regard to an e-mail sent by you to the Computer Science students at The University of Regina on August 30, 2023. Students and some alumni were concerned about this matter, and when I heard about it I felt it necessary to reach out as a concerned academic and as a former faculty member that was entrusted with roles in the Department such as the course architect of CS 210. For completeness, below is a screenshot of the message provided to students, which was later made publicly available to me.



From Computer Science Department on
2023-08-30 11:05

Details Headers Plain text

Dear CS Students,

As the demand for computer science education has grown in the last few years, the size of our student body has expanded to nearly 1000 CS majors. This has resulted in the need for increased class sizes.

With large classes come large amount of marking that needs to be done in a short period of time. In an effort to provide timely feedback on student work, some of our courses will be moving to a sample-based marking approach. You will still be expected to complete all elements of any assignments provided. However, the course instructor will choose a subset of the elements to be marked. Which elements that are marked will only be revealed after the marking is complete. In order to help you assess how you have done on other unmarked elements of the assignment, either complete solutions will be provided or the assignment solution will be reviewed (either in-class or in supplemental instruction sessions). As always, if you have questions about the difference between your solution and the one expected, you are welcome to attend the office hours of the course instructor.

If sample-based marking is to be used, this will be made clear in the assignment instructions. You will also find further information in the course syllabus.

I hope you have a good start to your semester, and enjoy the courses you are taking. Let me know if you have any questions about this.

Dr. Hoeber

It should be a given that students expect high-quality learning at a Canadian public university. I am concerned about adoption for large classes of sampled grading methods for assignments, as outlined in the above e-mail for the following reasons:

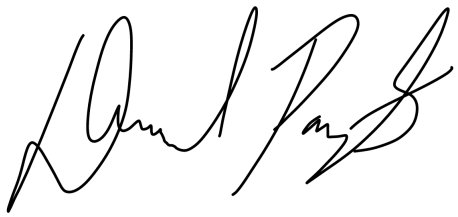
1. At University of Regina, students are assigned a final grade that is often believed/expected to reflect the whole of a student's performance overall in a term.
2. A fundamental flaw of "sample-based" grading is that it cannot provide feedback on the whole of an assignment submitted by a student. Ultimately, if the goal of an assignment is to assess the work of a student as a whole and to assign a grade to said work, picking and choosing parts of the assignment may make it difficult to holistically assess the performance of a student.
3. Assessments of work should have clear expectations of what exactly is assigned a grade and what is not prior to submitting work.
4. It may as well be that the parts that are not assessed can be omitted if they are not a part of the overall work/assessment of a student in the context of an assignment.
5. The reason given for moving to this grading approach seems to be increased class sizes, implying that students would have received grades and feedback on ungraded parts of assignments in other, more regular circumstances. This means students are not receiving the same quality of assessment for their education as previous students did.
6. Ultimately, the academic freedom for faculty/instructors to choose the best way to assess their students is one that such a method could fall under for use; however, potentially flawed, unproven, and unconventional methods of assessments such as "sampling" like this may have undesirable effects. When communicated to the students at large, while transparent and clear, it may create a compulsion among faculty or sessional staff to go along with that particular assessment technique. This may come into conflict with the academic freedom of the instructor. Clarification around this will be helpful to better understand how this approach is being implemented for students, and the rights of those instructors for large classes.

Here are some suggestions I have, as alternatives within this framework of assessment and constraints:

1. Foster independent study with additional exercise sets and readings for students to practise outside of the typical assignment framework. Assignments typically are meant to assess a student's understanding of material. Assigning, for instance, an exercise set that students can work on outside of assignments places clear distinctions/boundaries and expectations (mutually) around what will be or not be graded as part of course marks.
2. Create fewer (larger) but more substantive assignments that can be entirely graded.
3. Hire qualified sessional instructors and/or faculty with university teaching experience, capable of teaching and successfully executing large classes/sections.
4. Public universities as some other educational institutions are given special rights/responsibilities to the public as degree-granting bodies, this means ensuring students are being held to some standard expected in our field for standard degree programs. If too many students are being allowed to take courses and there are issues delivering courses properly, consider capping student numbers more strictly so as to preserve the ability for faculty/staff to teach properly. Alternatively, if there are resources insufficient to offer a course competently, do not offer the course.

I hope the Department can gain better control of its assessment methods for students going forward, and maintain high-quality Computer Science education. Along with receiving this letter, it will also be published publicly as a matter of transparency. With permission, I can publish any response/clarifications to these concerns about grading as well.

Have a beautiful day!



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