Three Guidelines and Two Workarounds for Tackling Makeup Exam Policies

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Are you one of the many instructors who loathe makeup exam requests? Makeup exams often create more work and can put us in the awkward position of judging the truthfulness of our students’ excuses. Although we can’t avoid makeup requests entirely, we can better prepare ourselves and our students by having a transparent and fair makeup exam policy. When designing your policy, always ask yourself: Does the policy allow students to learn what you want them to learn in your course?

Here are three guidelines for an effective makeup exam policy and two possible workarounds.

1. **Alignment**: Align your policy with the exam and course goals. Makeup policies are likely to differ depending on the type of assessment (quizzes, exams), their frequency in the course, and the weighting for students’ grades. For example, dropping the lowest grade won’t work for courses with only one or two tests. If an early exam is an essential foundation for later concepts or is a primary source of learning feedback, students shouldn’t be denied the opportunity for a makeup.

2. **Transparency**: Share your policy with your students in advance, preferably in your syllabus. You can invite students to read and offer feedback on your makeup policy to ensure that it is clear. The policy should include necessary details for students to understand the policy. This may include how and when students should notify you, the period of time in which the makeup must be completed, acceptable excuses, and impact on grades (Weimer, 2012). Your policy should also include a brief rationale to help students understand your thinking about how the policy benefits (rather than punishes) them as learners (Paff, 2015).

3. **Fairness**: Students’ complaints about makeup policies are often due to perceptions of unfairness regarding how the policy is enacted for different students and situations. Thus, your policy should ensure that all students are treated fairly and “must be equitable, providing students equal chances to earn a good grade by demonstrating equal knowledge” (Perlman, 2006). Your makeup tests should not be more difficult, or assess learning in a different way, than the original test (Perlman, 2006).

The workarounds: dropping or substituting the lowest score

Is it possible to structure your course so that missing a single test is not catastrophic? The workarounds described below involve dropping or substituting one exam score for all students. This policy benefits students who miss an exam, but also benefits students who take all exams. (Remember, fairness is key!) The consequences of dealing with life challenges or having multiple exams in one day is lessened when students can drop their lowest exam score. Students might also be less anxious because the stakes on any one test are lower (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2013). Best of all, students do not have to give you an excuse for missing an exam!

(Over)
When deciding among the options below, the main consideration is whether students are required to take the final exam. The final exam should be required if it is cumulative, or if it prepares students for a professional exam, certification, or licensure. Also keep in mind that cumulative exams support deep and durable learning (Lawrence, 2013).

Here are two options if students are required to take the final exam. For these options, all exams prior to the final exam must be worth the same value (e.g., each exam is worth 15 percent of the final course grade).

1. **Drop the lowest score.** The final exam score cannot be dropped, even if it is the lowest score. The lowest exam score prior to the final is dropped.
2. **Substitute the lowest score.** The lowest grade prior to the final exam is substituted with the final exam score. The final exam counts twice toward one’s grade in the class.

Here are two options if students are not required to take the final exam (i.e., students can miss any one exam in the course). For these options, all exams, including the final, must be worth the same value.

1. **Drop the lowest score.** If students are satisfied with their grade in the course, they can skip the final exam. They may also take the final exam in hopes that they can drop an earlier lower score (which may be a missed exam). The final exam score can be dropped if it is the lowest score.
2. **Substitute the lowest score.** Students can skip the final exam or take the final exam in hopes that they can substitute an earlier lower score. The lowest exam score (which may be the final) is substituted with the average of the student’s other exam scores.

For these policies to work well, students need to know their overall grade in the course and potential outcomes given your policy (e.g., their final course grade if they choose not to take the final exam). You can set up your Learning Management System to automatically drop or substitute exam grades, or provide students with a spreadsheet that helps them to compute possible outcomes.

When developing your policy, consider your course and students. Policies might be long or short, firm or flexible. In all cases, they should be transparent, fair, and justified with a focus on their value for student learning. Most importantly, your policy should ensure that students do not miss an essential learning opportunity in your course.

References


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