

## Interpreting Grades and Transcripts

After much procrastination and dread, I forced myself to sort through a box of documents belonging to my deceased wife. It seems Tia saved every scrap of paper the kids had ever scribbled on, every card and letter I had ever given her over thirty-three years of wedding anniversaries and birthdays and Valentine's Days.

In a separate neatly organized folder were her professional items. There were copies of applications to public and private schools in North Carolina, Missouri and South Carolina as she moved with me while I pursued my career as a biologist. There were replicates of letters of interest to school superintendents. There were updated resumes and certifications and paperwork associated with the two Masters degrees she earned after we settled in Spartanburg. Numerous letters from grateful parents of her students were rubber-banded in the collection. I found communications on letterheads from state-level administrators in North and South Carolina congratulating her for recognition as Teacher of the Year at the district level, along with notifications that she was a candidate for state-wide Teacher of the Year awards. The most personal items were handwritten "thank you" notes from students whose life trajectories she had uniquely influenced.

I found an envelope containing her academic transcript. I had never seen it. Tia had told me what a difficult time she had Geology in her first year of college at Appalachian State University. "All rocks look pretty much the same to me," she admitted. I knew her grade wasn't good, but until I saw the transcript, I never knew what it was. Yet there it was, on the very first line of her transcript: GEOL.....D. The other first semester grades were unremarkable: B's and C's.

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In the fall of 1975 when Tia had just started at App State, I was in my first semester at UNC-Chapel Hill with my best buddy from high school as my roommate. He didn't mind that I spent hours and hours painting a huge mural of the solar system on the cinder block walls of our dorm

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room. I didn't mind that he was rarely in the room. He was having a good time on the way to losing his full-ride scholarship.

Based on a placement test, I was in a Math class that seemed far beyond my ability. In high school, I could follow along with what the teacher put on the board, recognize a pattern, and replicate it to generate correct answers without really understanding what I was doing. Not so in this college math class. The book made no sense to me, and neither did what happened in class.

I loved my Astronomy class. I was amazed to learn that a beam of starlight separated by a prism into bands on a spectrum can reveal the chemical composition of that star, and, based on the Doppler shift, how fast that star is approaching or moving away. Amazing! Alas, during night labs on the roof of the observatory where groups of students shared a telescope to look at the sky, every star looked pretty much the same as any other. Each had a name or number, but I didn't care. Furthermore, everywhere I looked in the night sky, I could see Big Dippers and Little Dippers and Medium-size Dippers. Dippers everywhere! For me, sessions in the planetarium were scintillating. Astronomy class was awesome. Night labs with telescopes were awful.

After two sessions in a Russian Government class (no clue how I got assigned to this), I was eager to avoid any more boredom. Coincidentally, there was a senior from my high school in this class who loathed this course as much as I. We made a pact: I'd go to class one week, furnish him with my notes and updates, and then I'd sit out the next week while he took his turn in class. The plan was for both of us to show up on test days. You can probably guess that this was not a strategy for success, but to me as an 18 year old with zero interest in Russian Government, it seemed reasonable.

My favorite class was Macroeconomics, which I knew nothing about at the onset. I sat near the back of the lecture hall, which seated about 400 classmates. Far away on the stage was an animated bald professor who made the topic come alive. This stuff was fascinating. I did the readings in the textbook. Things were really clicking. After five or six weeks of nothing but lecture, I asked a fellow next to me, "When are we going to have a test in this class?" He said, "We've already had two." "No way," I exclaimed. "I've been here for every class." "Have you been going to the recitation sections each week? That's where we do homework and take tests." "I've never heard of this! I've just been coming to class."

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What a jolt to discover that I'd missed all the assignments, quizzes, discussions, and two tests in my favorite class, and it was almost midterm.

Math was undecipherable. Russian Government was anarchy. I was bankrupt in Economics. Astronomy might have been salvageable, but overall this first semester was a disaster. That's why, after a confessional call to my parents to explain the dilemma, I officially dropped out of college on the day of midterms, first semester freshman year. I went back to something I'd been doing every Saturday and all through the summers in high school. I worked at my dad's chain link fence company, where I was a Ph.D. (Post hole Digger.) I started at the top, and worked my way down!

My downfall at Chapel Hill was unassisted by drugs or alcohol. I didn't do either, ever! I didn't get spiritual with Purple Jesus. I didn't relax with Mary Jane. I didn't fit in with that crowd. I didn't want to. I simply didn't study enough.

Had I finished that first semester, I would probably have failed Econ, Math, and Russian Government. Perhaps I could have passed Astronomy. I didn't hang around to find out. What a waste of time and money and paint! Fortunately, my short stint in Chapel Hill did not produce a transcript. Think about what a sad tune those four notes (F F F C or F F F D) could have played for the rest of my life!

After two years at Acme Fence Company, I decided to give college another try, but this time at a small private liberal arts institution. Meanwhile, I had matured a great deal. From the first day at Campbell University, I treated school as my job. I worked on academics eight hours a day every weekday, and willingly did "overtime" anytime it seemed necessary to earn the highest grade.

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Unlike me, Tia made it through her first year and stuck with college. I skimmed the remaining semesters of her transcripts from App State and UNC- Greensboro where she transferred and graduated with a degree in Mathematics and a certification as a teacher of the hearing-impaired. Her transcripts were saturated with B's and C's. A's and A-'s were rare across those eight semesters. Her transcript didn't forecast the accolades she accumulated as a

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teacher and administrator over a thirty-five year career. How could such a remarkable person have such a mundane transcript?

The *only* D's she ever made were in those two first-year geology courses. I think it is just plain cruel that the Registrar's Office at App State listed those grades in Geology as the first grades for each of those two semesters. They could have placed the grades for any of her other courses at the tops of those lists. That simple act meant that for the rest of her life, for every job application that required an academic transcript, for every application for graduate school, the first grade any potential employer or grad school admissions officer would see is a D. What a first impression that must have made! And what a misleading one!

I sat there with her transcript in my hand, thinking about Tia having to overcome the adversity of such a poor grade in such a prominent location on every copy of her transcript. I considered my attitude about transcripts. I believed that transcripts were an unassailable record of academic performance and aptitude, and a reliable indicator of a person's ability. After that debacle at Chapel Hill, I attached a great deal of importance to transcripts, and very carefully groomed my transcript at Campbell. I was certain that any blemishes would diminish future opportunities, starting with acceptance into graduate school in pursuit of my career goal to become a college professor. Looking back, there was a B in a sophomore English course when I admittedly had a terrible attitude. I was convinced my "instructor" was better suited for pushing (or riding) a broom than she was for encouraging me to be more careful with the English language. My only C in college was in a Calculus course the last semester of my senior year. That was the semester of our engagement and the one that I learned of my acceptance into graduate school. I may have slacked off a bit. The Biology faculty at Campbell who had invested so much time in me and awarded me the Departmental Award for Excellence in Biology that year must have been disappointed with my case of senioritis.

My impressive transcript and a decent score on the Graduate Record Exam made me a viable candidate for admission to the four universities where I applied. I was accepted into the Ph.D. program in Physiology at UNC-Chapel Hill, which held special meaning. Here was an opportunity to prove to myself and to others that I could succeed there on a second attempt.

How could she be recognized in two states as an outstanding teacher of mathematics when her transcript shows that she was merely average or occasionally above average in every

math course she'd taken? Here is my hypothesis. Math did not come easily to Tia. She was unable to leap to a correct answer intuitively. Instead, she relied on persistence and determination to complete a problem. She could figure out the answer to a problem but it took considerable effort and concentration. Once she discovered a technique, she could explain that method to others. She could empathize with any student who struggled with math, and could patiently guide them through the process to a reasonable answer. In that bundle of student letters, several students credited Ms. PD with teaching math in such a way that they overcame their fear of it. For some, math became a favorite subject.

In retrospect, perhaps her difficulties with math as a college student ultimately equipped Tia to be a stellar teacher of mathematics for her middle school students. It has taken me years to realize what Tia knew all along. *Ordinary* students have the potential to do *extraordinary* things. She knew that a transcript is not a reliable indicator of character nor does it reveal the extent to which a person shows compassion or mercy or patience, each of which I now value more than "smarts."

If a transcript is an unreliable predictor of the future accomplishments, what good is a transcript? For students like me, building an impressive transcript is a way to keep score academically, a way to become distinctive, to document an ability to rise to every intellectual challenge, and a way to remain motivated. In retrospect, I probably ascribed too much importance to a transcript. Perhaps I expended too much energy manicuring mine. Looking back on some of those courses that I "aced," I wish I had prioritized really understanding the material rather than studying in such a way as to assure the highest grade possible on tests. I'd probably have a slightly lower GPA but greater overall knowledge, appreciation and retention.

The message my parents conveyed to me was "Always do the best you can." Better advice might have been to "Do the best you can under the circumstances." I think about those hundreds of students I've assigned grades to spanning thirty-two years of college teaching. I ponder some of the circumstances that they (and you and I) encountered that affected grades: distracting/distressing romantic relationships; family schisms; overbearing or uninvolved parents; parents navigating a divorce; legal issues; medical issues; rape; abuse; responsibility to care for parents, siblings, or grandparents; financial stress, disharmony in the dorm; destructive friendships; death of a loved one; poor judgement; substance abuse; immaturity; insufficient

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time-management skills; procrastination; anxiety and/or depression. You can add more to this list of factors. My point here: There are many circumstances in addition to ineffective study habits that can hinder academic performance.

I think back to the other B on my college transcript. Organic Chemistry has the reputation of being a challenging course no matter which institution one might attend. I was doing quite well in Organic Chemistry with Dr. Jung, a taskmaster and perfectionist. I was adequately prepared for the first test and I earned an A or A-. I was also ready for the second test, but on test day, I awoke with a migraine headache. I had been plagued by these headaches for years and knew that they typically resolved only after hours of agony culminating in vomiting and then resolution. Any light or sound worsened the pain. But my fear of missing that Organic Chemistry test and having to request a make-up was overwhelming, so I eased my body across campus, settled into my seat, and did the best I could with a throbbing head. The grade was not horrible, but it wasn't a typical grade for me. I did fine on the remaining test and the final exam, but Dr. Jung was not one to deviate from his grading formula. All my other grades in that course were in the 90's, but that one atypical test grade brought my average down to a B, and that's what appeared on my transcript. Maybe it would have been better if I had sought a make-up test, but I wasn't thinking clearly that day. Who knows whether I made the best decision?

That was one situation where my course grade was *not* indicative of my typical performance and one where I believe a compassionate professor would have considered the circumstances and would have been justified in using discretion to assign a grade higher than the number generated by his formula. As a result, at the end of every semester as I calculate course grades, I review every grade in every category for every student, and cheerfully adjust my formula if I feel that one "bad" grade will result in a grade that is not representative of the level of competence a student has consistently demonstrated in the course.

A course grade *should* be a good approximation of a student's competence but that's not always the case. Let me give you another personal example. One of the pre-requisites for my Ph.D. program was a course in Physical Chemistry. I hadn't taken P Chem as an undergraduate biology major, so I was required to take it after I had started the Ph.D. program in Chapel Hill. I was a little embarrassed when I went to the lecture hall where there were about a hundred

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undergraduates. I attended every class, sat up front, and tried diligently to understand entropy, enthalpy, chemical kinetics, thermodynamics, and the like. I had a tenuous grasp of these concepts but I was inept at the calculus necessary to solve most of the problems. As the semester wore on, I became increasingly concerned about my grade in this course. For graduate students, the grade options were P for Pass, H for Honors or High Pass, or F for Fail. I understood an F would mean immediate dismissal from the Ph.D. program and essentially an abrupt end to my dream of becoming a biology professor.

I went in to the final exam feeling very uneasy and with little confidence. I came out of the exam thinking, “How am I going to explain to Tia and my relatives that very soon I’ll get an official notification that I have been dismissed from the graduate program. We’ll need to move back to Fayetteville where I can work at my father’s chain link fence company.” Oh, no. Not again! I said nothing for those two long days as I waited for the grades to be posted on the classroom door. Eventually I had to face reality, so I made the long trek across that beautiful campus with a sense of doom. With great trepidation, I searched the list of student ID numbers and course grades until I found mine. This grade would determine my future. There it was! Could it be real? Is this a mistake? Next to my code number was the grade of H. Glory hallelujah! How could this be?

I would have been most grateful and tremendously relieved to have earned a P, but there it was. An H! Had I really done that well on the exam and in the course? I wasn’t going to ask the professor if this was mistake. I’ll never know for certain, but I extracted a huge lesson from this experience. A grade should accurately indicate the degree of mastery of a topic. That professor apparently believed I really knew Physical Chemistry quite well. I, on the other hand, had very little confidence in my grasp of P Chem.

That was an example of getting a grade that may have *overestimated* my competence in a particular course. I suspect that far more often a student receives a grade that *underestimates* their expertise in the subject. That happened to me once in a statistics class. The professor was walking up and down the aisles of the classroom, hand-delivering a graded quiz to each student. The kid on my right had a red 14 in a circle. To my left, a poor soul slumped over her red-circled 12. I caught glimpse of other grades: 8, 17, 15. These must be imbeciles. I was supremely confident that I had “aced” this test and anticipated my usual grade in the 90’s. At

last, the professor approached with my paper. There in my red circle was a 24. A 24! What? I *know* this stuff. That *can't* be right! But that was the grade. What a discrepancy between what I thought I knew and what the professor thinks I know!

I've always insisted that if a person tries hard enough, they can earn whatever grade they desire. On that point, I'll tell you another personal story. After I had earned the Ph.D., I was doing post-doctoral research at the University of Missouri with Dr. Andrew McClellan. As the head of the lab, he thought it would be a good idea for me to audit his course in Biomedical Electronics. I would be in a class of undergraduate electrical engineering students and a few other advanced biology and physics majors. I was anxious as I remembered Physical Chemistry in Chapel Hill.

During class as Dr. McClellan diagrammed electrical circuits on the board and explained how each component modified a signal, things made perfect sense to me. However, I was completely baffled by the homework assignments. I would apply all my efforts for hours to no avail. I'd re-read the text. I'd review my class notes. Even after all that, I was lost and frustrated. I'd show up to class having made little headway on each homework problem. Dr. McClellan would ask for our answers. Some young whippersnapper would go to the board and chalk-talk his or her way to the solution, which seemed so obvious at that moment. That became the pattern for me. What we did in class made perfect sense, but outside of class, working on my own, no matter how hard I tried or how much time I spent, the answers did not come. I was too proud to ask Dr. McClellan or a classmate for help. This humiliation forced me to abandon my long-held view that "Success will come to anyone who tries hard enough." Although it was a miserable time for me, some good came from it. My experience with futility in biomedical electronics has made me much more sympathetic to those who are asserting their best efforts, yet aren't performing as well as they'd like.

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Seeing those two D's on Tia's transcript triggered all these memories. How are we to interpret this and all the other grades on her transcript, or mine, or yours? What does a transcript reveal about a person? All I can say for sure is that under those circumstances, her instructor determined that Tia's grasp of geology as he taught it was "below average." What does that say about her as a person? Very little. That is my whole point for this essay: A transcript represents

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*something* about its author, but has many limitations. One shouldn't attach much too importance to a transcript. A transcript is but one measure of a person. Other attributes are much more meaningful and significant.

We can't ignore the fact that a transcript can elbow open the door of opportunity or nudge it shut, but transcripts are unreliable as indicators of the caliber of a person. As Tia and so many others have shown, the life lived matters far more that little piece of paper from the Registrar's Office.

GR Davis Jr

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