

Working to Learn
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It's dinnertime. You've just put in a shift at your job, and now you are looking forward to several hours of reading for your classes tomorrow. You wish you could just skip your classes altogether, but all your instructors have attendance policies. And a couple of them are sure to quiz you to make sure you did the assigned readings. You sigh and look at the clock. You haven't even started on the history paper you have due in a couple of days. Why does college have to be so much *work*?

Well, the simple fact is that **learning** takes **time** and **effort**. And learning is what WMU is all about. Think about it: How do you get good at something, whether it be a sport, a musical instrument or doing algebra? You already know the answer: Practice, practice, practice.

Course work and learning

In college, you are taking classes designed to help you to learn or refine physical, artistic, technical, or intellectual skills. An important skill underlying all learning is critical thinking; this skill helps you to understand and evaluate ideas. To truly master these skills, you need to exercise your body, your senses, and your mind. You need to challenge yourself to get better. Think of **work** as an investment in your **learning**: No pain, no gain.

Your instructors are your partners in **learning** here at WMU. Attendance policies and other course rules are not ends in themselves, any more than papers or tests are. They are meant to help you become accomplished in the subject matter of the courses you are taking.

Instructors have attendance policies because they believe attending class is crucial for understanding the course material and performing well on graded assignments. They also want to give you credit for the time you invest in your **learning** by attending class.

Instructors give assignments and tests to help you practice or demonstrate the skills needed to master key principles or techniques in the subject you're studying. Assignments typically provide a structure for demonstrating **learning** under controlled conditions that are presumed to be the same for all students taking a class. For example, instructors presume that no one has seen the questions for an exam in advance unless everyone has had the same opportunity.

Course work and grades

WMU has rules about **academic dishonesty** because grades cannot reflect actual learning if students have avoided the work needed to actually master the skills or materials they were supposed to. It's also not **fair** to other students who have, in fact, made the necessary investments of time and effort to learn. Being prepared and doing your own work will help you to be more confident as a learner and will help you to avoid

plagiarism and other academic shortcuts that undermine your **learning** and violate your instructors' **expectations**.

Just keep in mind that you might **work** really hard for a class, and even put in a lot of time, and still not get the grade you want. Sometimes you will find a subject or task particularly challenging, or you may misunderstand an assignment. Sometimes you will simply miscalculate, especially when you're trying something new. Instructors can only grade you on what you turn in, and they have to use the same criteria for everyone.

Doing your part

Part of being successful in college is getting a sense of how much **work** and what kind of **work** is needed to meet your academic goals. Involve your instructors in setting and meeting your goals. Good instructors will tell you what they want you to **learn** and give you clear instructions for demonstrating what you've learned. Some instructors will even tell you how many hours they think you'll need to devote to the course outside of class in order to do well. If you're not clear on these key aspects of your educational experience at WMU, ask about them during class or office hours. Class time, lab time, studio time and office hours are all resources WMU provides to you to help you **learn**. Make the most of them.

Of course, the demands of a college education can be hard to manage. You need to schedule your time well and make use of reference librarians, academic advisors, tutors, counselors, and other support staff at WMU. They're committed to your success, too! It takes everyone in an academic community doing his or her part for **learning** to flourish.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you know if you've worked hard on an assignment or test? How do you know if you haven't worked hard enough?
2. How has attending class and keeping up with assigned readings helped you to understand the *kind* of work required for tests and other class assignments? Have you ever missed the point of an assignment by doing the wrong *kind* of work? Why? How might you avoid similar misunderstandings in the future?
3. Have you ever received a grade that you think was too *low*, given the time and effort you put into an assignment? Have you ever received a grade that you think was too *high*, given the time and effort you put into an assignment? Discuss.
4. The degree of time and effort required for a good grade can vary greatly from student to student. Some students grasp class concepts quickly and can get by with less studying. Others struggle to understand fundamentals in the same class. Furthermore, some students have more time to devote to their studies than others. How can grading take account of these differences? *Should* it?
5. One of the difficulties in conducting research is keeping straight on where you got your ideas. If you claim someone else's words or ideas as your own, when they

aren't, you are committing plagiarism. How can you make sure that you're doing your own work and that you acknowledge the work of others who have contributed to your learning?

Examples

1. Bill has written a history paper that he thinks is pretty good, all things considered. But English grammar was never his strong point, and he knows that spell-check doesn't catch every mistake. So he takes it to Susan, who lives one floor above him in the residence hall and owes him a favor. "Hey, would you look this over for me?" he asks as he heads off to his biology lab. After lunch, he calls in on Susan, picks up the paper, and heads back to his room to enter on his laptop the changes he made to his grammar and spelling.
2. "I *hate* vocabulary tests!" exclaims Louis in annoyance as he slumps onto the sofa. "I never get more than sixty percent, and those vocab scores are dragging down my French grade." Louis' fraternity brother glances over from his chair in front of the TV and explains that he uses flashcards to remember key terms in his science classes. "I guess it may sound kinda lame," he goes on, "but my Mom showed me how to do it when I was in grade school and it really works." Since Louis doesn't have any index cards, his friend digs some out of his drawer in his own room, and they scrounge up some colored pens. Using his buddy's science cards as a model, Louis rewrites his vocabulary list as a series of flashcards and does significantly better on the test the next day.

How are these scenarios similar? How are they different? Have you or your friends have been in these kinds of situations?

Do the students' grades in these scenarios reflect the work they were supposed to have done? Why or why not?

Are any of the students in these scenarios allowing others to do work *for* them?

If no, what did they do right? If yes, what did they do wrong?

How could any ethical problems in these scenarios be avoided? Be sure to consider the role of friends, classmates, instructors and support staff.

The examples come from Creighton University's handbook, Learning in the Academy: An Introduction to the Culture of Scholarship, available at: www2.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/docs/LearningInAcademy.pdf.