

## **Comment On: Managing Student Email: A Family Economist's Perspective**

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### **The Importance of this Topic**

I confess that I jumped at the chance to review this paper because its title suggested a solution to a predicament I have experienced. When I began teaching at the University level, I believed I was well-prepared. I had received substantial training in my chosen discipline and even some training in pedagogical theory. Unfortunately, this excellent training did not include the practicalities of course management. There were 440 students enrolled in the first course which I taught as an instructor. I can vividly remember the stark terror associated with logging on to my e-mail after a weekend away because I knew my inbox would be filled with dozens of student messages. This incident made me aware of the necessity of a practical approach to managing student email. Dr. Andersen's paper nicely illustrates that student email can be approached like any other management task and suggests ways of managing it which are beneficial to both teachers and students.

### **Policies? Or Something More?**

Five policies form the core of this paper. These policies may be conceived as representing two important themes in course management: allocating teaching resources effectively and teaching students to behave responsibly. The first of these, effective allocation of teaching resources, encompasses the policies of not answering each email individually and not answering email after 5 pm. Before the advent of email, instructors would have never dreamed of being accessible to students 24 hours a day, yet email has made round-the-clock access possible. It has also exponentially increased the number of e-mails received from students. I've noticed that many students send messages which appear to be part of some sort of pre-writing warm up ritual that requires them to confirm specific assignment details that are clearly stated on the syllabus. While this obviously helps students start writing, it doesn't necessarily require a reply on the part of the instructor. This type of email is an example of the fact that, although the time to receive and number of student emails have greatly expanded, the quality of communication has not increased. Setting limits on when and whether student emails will be answered allows instructors to concentrate on quality, not quantity, of communication with students.

The other three policies represent the equally important issue of teaching students to behave responsibly. Having students consult the syllabus, assignments, and postings on WebCT before sending e-mail, ensures that they will carefully consult available resources before asking the instructor. When they make the transition from school to career they will need the skills to determine the demands of a task without needless and costly consultation. This policy helps students acquire these important skills. The last policy, letting students know that the instructor may take up to two or three working days to reply to an email, sends the clear message that *procrastination does not pay*. It's been my experience that desperate 11<sup>th</sup> hour pleas for help tend to create drama, not learning opportunities. With this policy in place, students will realize that they need to plan ahead in order to receive constructive advice on their assignments. This is important because instructors are not doing students a favor by assuming all responsibility. The end result of these three policies is something more than their individual parts; they provide a way for teachers to be more effective in teaching students skills that may be just as important in their personal and professional futures as the subject matter of our courses.

### **Suggestions for Future Work In This Area**

The message of this paper would be greatly strengthened by data supporting the advantages of this particular approach to managing student email. I would like to know if the volume of email received by Dr. Andersen changed upon implementation of these policies. It would also be interesting to examine the quality of email received from students in courses where these policies are in place. For example, if students are discouraged from consulting the instructor for answers to their inquiries about routine matters, will they refrain from emailing the instructor about content-related issues? Or will they be more likely to email the instructor with thoughtful questions? Both qualitative and quantitative data from courses where these policies are in place would strengthen the advice put forth in this paper.

Overall, this is a very interesting and useful paper. It clearly presents a case for specific email management policies and provides a method for allocating teaching resources away from needless duplication of communication. It also brings up the fact that sound classroom management policies may bring the added bonus of guiding students in becoming more responsible for their own performance and better managers of their own time.

Endnote

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