

From: Indira Nair and John Papinchak  
Re: Returning graded work  
Date: September 10, 2009

Faculty teaching large courses often struggle with the best way to return graded assignments in a timely and efficient manner while respecting the privacy of students. Some circumstances make it difficult to achieve all three (timeliness, efficiency and privacy), hence this memo. This memo outlines our guidelines on student privacy, suggestions for alternative ways to return students' work, and language for a release if faculty members choose that route.

Our student privacy guidelines state that "You [faculty] are accountable for maintaining the privacy of student information in compliance with University and federal policies." The University policy is designed to comply with the provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1232g. Towards that end,

- Faculty members **SHOULD NOT** display student scores or grades publicly in association with names, student ID numbers, Social Security Numbers, computer user ids, or other personal identifiers. Because the student ID is not public information, posting non-directory information such as grades using any part of the student ID as an identifier is not permitted.
- Faculty members **SHOULD NOT** put papers, homework set, exams, lab reports, etc. containing student names and grades in publicly accessible places (e.g., outside your or the TA's office). Students should not have access to the scores and grades of others in the class.

There are a variety of obvious options for returning students' graded work. For example,

- If your course has a recitation, work can be returned then.
- If you have TAs, work can be returned during their office hours.
- Work can be returned during your office hours.
- Work can be returned by a departmental assistant or secretary in his/her office
- Work can be placed into private student mailboxes (which exist in some students' home academic department)

If, however, you do not have recitations or TAs and are teaching a medium to large size class, you might do the following, with the permission of students (discussed later in this memo):

- Put the graded assignments – *with the grades on the second page or back of the exam/assignment* – in alphabetical piles on a table at the back of the lecture room.
- Put the graded assignments – *with the grades on the second page or back of the exam/assignment* – in an accordion file folder in alphabetical order that is passed around the lecture hall.

- Put the graded assignments – *with the grades on the second page or back of the exam/assignment* – in a “graded assignments” box in your assistant’s office.

If you choose any of the above options, you should have each student complete and sign a release for the course permitting you to distribute assignments/papers/exams via a ‘pile’ in the manner you have chosen. This would satisfy our student privacy guidelines and practices. However, it is not without its own ramifications and additional paper keeping requirements.

Even with a student release, inappropriate access is still possible (e.g., students looking at other students’ grades). While FERPA allows students to be a gatekeeper and to authorize such access, it may be seen in the final analysis as encouraging students to allow something that is potentially not in their best interest.

If you choose to distribute graded assignments with a signed release, you should clearly state that this is wholly elective on the student's part, and that a secure alternative is available if they so choose (e.g., picking it up during your office hours).

A release, perhaps appended to the first assignment of the semester, might read:

Given our class size and my commitment to returning graded work as quickly as possible, you may choose to sign the following release, which will allow your graded assignments/papers/exams/etc. to be distributed via \_\_\_\_\_. In so doing, you understand that this allows the potential that other students will see your graded work.

#### THE RELEASE STATEMENT

*“I hereby authorize Professor \_\_\_\_\_ to distribute my graded assignments via \_\_\_\_\_. In so doing, I recognize that such graded assignments are not perfectly secure, and I accept the potential that this may allow access to these documents by others.”*

The university appreciates the importance faculty members place on providing timely feedback in a way that protects student privacy, and you should feel free to contact any of the following people with questions or concerns:

John Papinchak, University Registrar (jp7p@andrew.cmu.edu)  
Indira Nair, Vice Provost for Education (in0a@andrew.cmu.edu)