

Student Privacy and Posting Grades

Background

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, commonly known as FERPA, is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student educational records. As defined by this Act, student educational records include scores and grades assigned to students during the course of the semester. This statement will inform you about several ways in which you may notify students about grades in a manner compliant with FERPA. For a complete description of the Act and related documents see www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html.

In addition to Federal laws that govern the privacy of educational records, the increase in instances of identity theft also raises the concern over publicly posting grades using Social Security Numbers (SSNs). University policy prohibits the use of social security numbers, or parts of them, from being posted to inform students of grades. University policy 8.2.3 on use of SSNs can be read on the following Web site: www.policy.ilstu.edu/fiscal/social_security.htm (note the underscore between the words “social” and “security”).

Inappropriate Practices

In spite of FERPA, it has been common practice for faculty to post grades publicly using either the student’s entire SSN or some variant (such as the last four digits). This not only places an important personal identifier in a public setting, it facilitates the theft of that identifier and increases the chance that other aspects of the student’s identity are compromised.

The practice of collecting or disseminating student work in a box outside faculty offices also leaves the student’s personal identifier, or, indeed, their work, open for theft.

The New University ID (UID)

The University has developed a new identification number for all students and faculty/staff called the UID. This 9-digit number will be used in place of the SSN for almost all purposes except those related to federal rules, financial aid or payroll related purposes. Note that it is inappropriate to post grades with a student’s new UID number (or some variant).

How to Post Student Grade Information

Under Illinois State’s new policy on the use of SSN’s, you may not post grades by SSN (or any variant of that number) or any other personal identifier (such as the new UID number) or their University Logon ID. The following guidelines describe several ways in which you may communicate grade information with your students in a way that protects their privacy.

Acceptable methods of notifying students about grades include:

- **Posting Grades Online**
If you wish to post grades online, do so using WebCT or Mallard. Because access to course materials in WebCT or Mallard require a unique logon name and password, grades distributed in this manner support FERPA.

- Posting Grades Publicly (hallway, office door, etc.)
If you wish to post grades in a public space, the only acceptable procedure is to assign students in your class a random number (known only to the student and you) and sort the grade roster in numerical order. You must sort the random numbers so that students' identities can't be inferred based on an alphabetic listing of the random numbers. This randomly-generated number may be used throughout the semester.
- Leave graded assignments with an assistant or with departmental office staff to give out to students. Grades should be in a sealed envelope with the student's name on it.

Email or mailing grades to students is not acceptable without the students' written permission. FERPA has long required that students give faculty written consent in order to release any educational record to anyone other than the student. Use a sealed envelope rather than a postcard. Note that students will have access to end-of-semester grades through the iCampus portal. Because access to the iCampus portal requires a unique ULID, password, and PIN, grades distributed in this manner support FERPA. Faculty are encouraged to direct students to the iCampus portal to view end-of-semester grades rather than mailing the information to them. Use of electronic mail to send grades is discouraged.

How to get help...

In order to assist faculty to find ways to keep grades in an electronic format to facilitate the dissemination of grades to students, two methods are described.

Excel — Microsoft Excel (or most other spreadsheet program) can help you manage your grades and to save your grade book in a format that can be uploaded to WebCT, to your course Web site, or simply posted on the wall. You can also easily assign students a random number (known only to the student and you) that will be used all semester. You can also easily sort these numbers in ascending or descending order so that a student's record cannot be inferred based on an alphabetic listing. The Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology (CTLT) is preparing detailed instructions on using Excel in this way. It will be available on the Tip Sheets page of the CTLT Web site: www.ftss.ilstu.edu/tipsheets/ .

WebCT — WebCT has a robust grade book function. You can use this grade book to manage your grades and to securely communicate grade information to students in numerical or text format. If you prefer keeping your grades in a spreadsheet like Excel, you can continue to do so, periodically exporting the spreadsheet in CSV format and then uploading the file to a WebCT course. Your WebCT grade book will be updated to reflect the newly uploaded information. In this way, it is possible to manage a WebCT grade book entirely from Excel. The Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology (CTLT) is preparing documentation about using a WebCT grade book. It will be available on the Tip Sheets page of the CTLT Web site: www.ftss.ilstu.edu/tipsheets/ .