

The Students' Dilemma

Five years ago, in response to a professor's pedagogical challenge, an entire class of sociology students organized themselves and skipped their final exam. The author, a leading conspirator, recounts the tale.

by John Kellogg Werner

“If no one shows up to take the final exam, everyone in the class will get an ‘A’. If anyone shows up and takes it, that person gets their grade, and everyone else gets an ‘F’.” This was the challenge sociology professor Dan Chambliss at Hamilton College (in Clinton, New York) had posed to his introductory sociology classes for eight years in a row. For seven of those years, students dutifully came and took the final exam. Most years, they did not even think he was serious.

However, in the eighth year (fall, 1988), all sixty-two students in the class—half of them in their first semester of college—skipped the exam. And for their truancy, an ‘A’ magically appeared on their transcripts.

“It looks easy, but it isn’t,” says Chambliss. “It only takes one person, showing up for any reason, to blow it for the entire class. And an ‘F’ on the final is a serious risk.”

The challenge, reminiscent of the famous “Prisoner’s Dilemma”—where distrust is fostered and used by the police to play on the fears of two co-criminals that their partner has confessed, in order to make each one confess to the crime—is intended to actively teach students the difficulties of organizing coalitions under dangerous conditions. “Dictators, or any unpopular leaders, often remain in power not because everyone likes them, or even because anyone likes them,” says Chambliss. “It only takes one conspirator who panics and turns everyone else in to the secret police.”

Nonetheless, five years ago, a group of conspirators believed that they could galvanize their fellow students towards unified action. Soon after Chambliss

John Kellogg Werner graduated from Hamilton College in 1992 and now works with special needs children in Boston.

issued his challenge, they set about to convince their classmates that it was possible. After laying their hands on a copy of the official class list from the college registrar, the plotters began to discuss the project with individual students. Despite a strong front of willing supporters, even the self-appointed ringleader had his uncertainties. “I didn’t take on any real partners,” he says. “I was afraid that if anyone knew I had doubts, everyone else would panic and the whole thing would fall apart.”

To secure total boycott participation, the plotters toyed with a variety of strategies. They held meetings for the entire class, but people did not show up. They thought about chartering a bus to take the whole class to nearby Albany on exam day. They even considered just hiring a bouncer to stand outside the door to keep people out of the exam room.

Through all these schemes, most students remained skeptical, if not actually afraid, of attempting the boycott. As a senior student put it: “this wasn’t announced three days before the exam. You had twelve weeks to sit around worrying about what the other guy would do.”

One woman, planning to transfer to another college, could not afford to lose the course credit. A few other students were in danger of failing, and needed to do well on the final in order to pass. Two star students were ranked highly in their respective classes and while getting an ‘A’ would not be any special event for them, an ‘F’ could destroy years of hard work. Still another student, with less honorable motives, gleefully suggested that he would reschedule to take his test after the official date and then blackmail the rest of the class into paying him \$10 each not to show up.

In one particularly tricky case, a hockey player from Canada would actually end up potentially worse off by receiving a guaranteed ‘A’, than if he took the

exam. He had performed poorly on the first two tests but had a chance to redeem himself on the final because of Chambliss’ ‘2X’ policy. By writing 2X on a completed final exam, the student would have the final exam counted twice and would replace the worst of the previous tests. For the hockey player, a simple ‘A’ on the final was not enough, the 2X was his only hope of a passing grade.

Even with all of these obstacles, the conspirators—with the help of a book of legal forms—finally hit upon a possible solution. It was a contract, a legal document that became valid only when all parties to the agreement had signed. The contract stipulated that all agreed not to take the exam, and that anyone who reneged on the agreement would be legally liable to everyone else. Copies of the contract were passed around; eventually everyone signed; and a photocopy of the contract with all sixty-two signatures appended and a wallet-sized photo of every student next to her or his signature (just to reinforce the commitment) were distributed and posted on the wall.

That did the trick. As Chambliss says, “[the conspirators] had to create that entire scenario just to convince everyone that no one else could back out.” On December 7, ten days before the scheduled exam date, sociology student Heather Russel went home for the vacation—and everyone else knew it. Her actions signaled that the boycott was for real.

On December 17, the plotters—still fearful that someone might succumb to last minute nerves and appear for the final—milled about in the building near the classroom where Chambliss sat with the exam. Half an hour after the appointed exam time, with no student having come in the door—not even the failing hockey player—Chambliss got up and left. The last essay on the test that no one took read: “Why did the boycott fail?” ●