GIFTS: Awards & Recognition to Shape Values & Drive Behavior

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Extrinsic motivation in higher education environments including FYE classes is frequently provided by grades and their follow-on effects such as the ability to progress through the curriculum. While providing powerful extrinsic motivation in many circumstances, grades have limitations. For instance, FERPA prevents public discussion of student grades, which can limit the ability to publicly recognize students for specific exceptional work. Other limitations include that it is not realistically possible to grade all elements of student behavior that may be desirable, and that grades are limited to classwork when desired behavior or outcomes could be taking place outside of the context of specific classes or over longer time periods than a single term.

Awards and public recognition, inside or outside of specific classes, are potentially useful in ways that grades can be limited – awards are not limited by FERPA and can be publicly recognized, and they can be targeted at areas that may be difficult, inappropriate, or logistically infeasible to grade, and can target valuable personal and professional skills of relevance to engineering that may not be regularly assessed or recognized through technical classwork.

The engineering program at Campbell University has created a set of awards that are given each year to selected students or teams in each year level (first-year, sophomore, etc.) that align with targeted values and behaviors to allow the program to repeatedly publicly recognize and emphasize the outcomes we wish to see in students. The awards program is integrated closely with teams in key classes during the first-year and senior year for students, while being aimed at individual work during the middle two years of study.

This awards program targets eight values the engineering program seeks to develop in each student: Community, Professionalism, Ownership, Relevance, Resilience, Ethics, Excellence, and Service. These values are introduced to students with discussion and reflection during the first year of study, as well as being prominently displayed in the academic building most associated with engineering. Awards are given in the spring semester. Students are nominated by others including peers, faculty and staff, and representatives from local industry with the process varying by which year of study the awards are for. In the first-year classes, the awards are given for teams best illustrating the values during their team-based engineering design project.

Typically, nominations include a written description of how the student (or team) has demonstrated that value in their work or conduct and the selection of awardees would be made by the Dean or faculty members leading the classes in which the awards are housed. All awards are given publicly and are recognized in perpetuity on large plaques in a central location to the engineering program. Overall, this program provides substantial emphasis and public recognition for desirable student behavior outside the scope of regular grades.

While this set of awards is implemented at the program level and targeting an institution-specific set of values, the author looks forward to sharing details of this program and enumerating methods that comparable processes could be integrated into individual classes as well. While the concept of awards for students is not novel, there remain opportunities to benefit from wider discussion and more creative implementation of awards and recognition for students to shape values and drive behavior.